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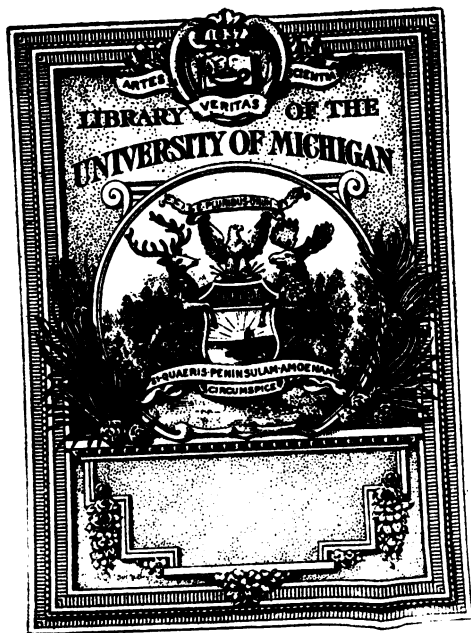
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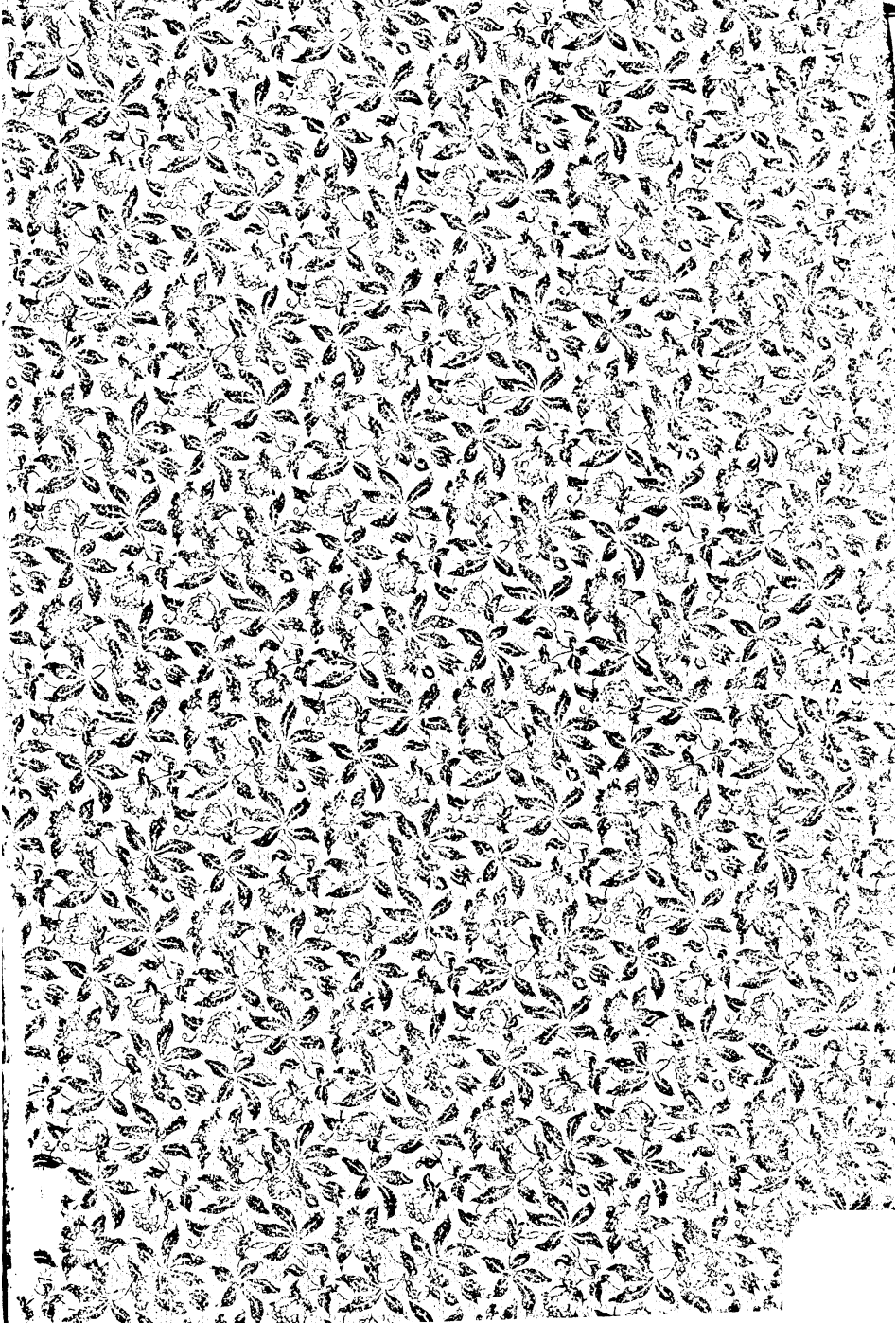
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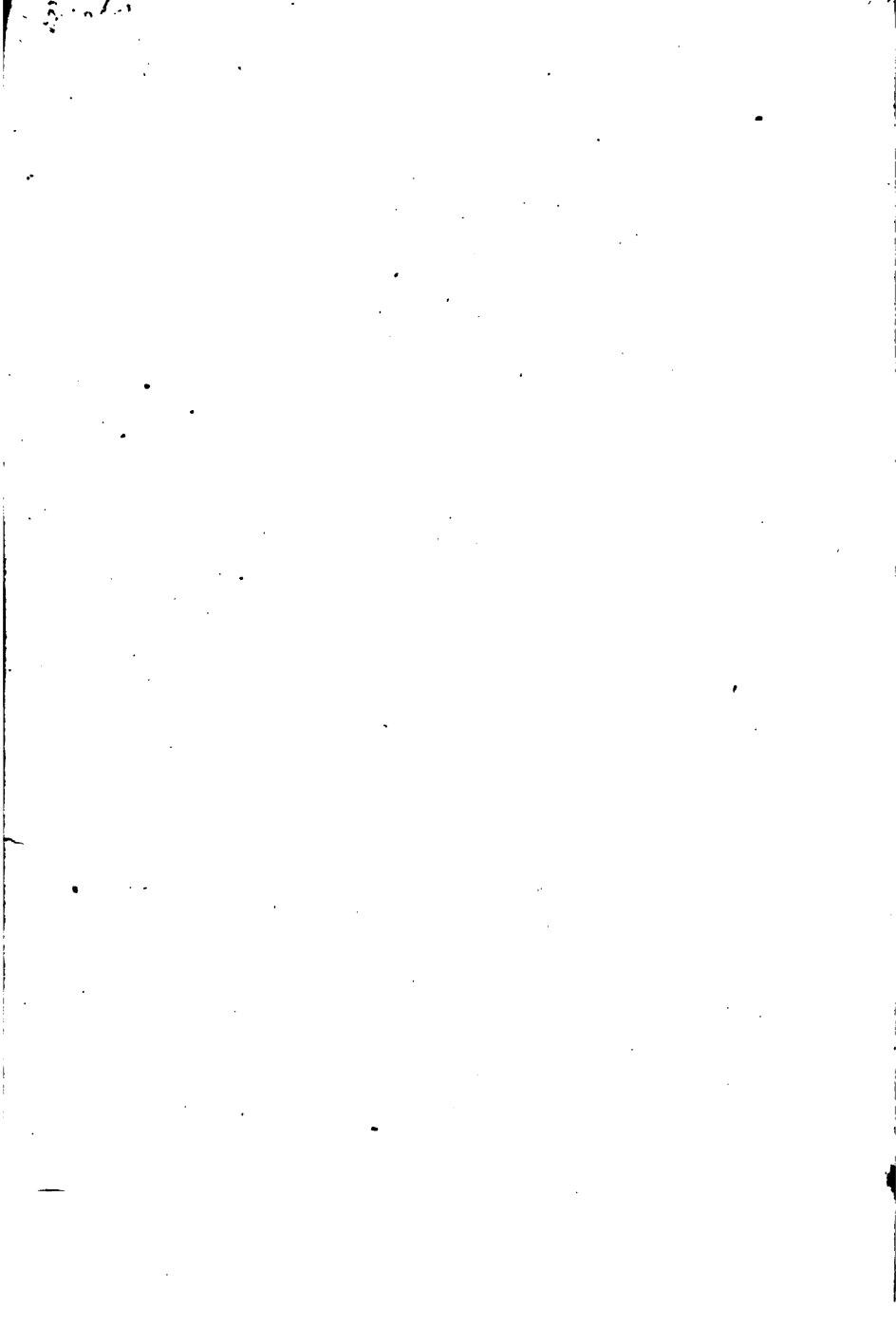
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THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF
A HOUSE-BOAT.

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THE STRANGE ADVENTURES
OF
A HOUSE-BOAT.

BY
WILLIAM BLACK,
AUTHOR OF "THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF A PHAETON," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. I.

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THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF A HOUSE-BOAT.

CHAPTER I.

"See! from the bower a form majestic moves,
And, smoothly gliding, shines along the groves;
Say, comes a goddess from the golden spheres?
A goddess comes—or Rosalind appears!"

"AND do choose a nice one this time!" says a small woman, with pleading, soft, brown eyes. "Just fancy those long days and weeks—in far out-of-the-way places: of course I want someone who is very, very pretty, and very, very delightful, to be my companion. Never mind about her being a heroine. Everybody can't be a heroine. I want somebody who will be merry at dinner, and cosy to walk with on the moonlight nights; and I don't care twopence about her character——"

"What?"

"You know quite well what I mean. I detest strong-minded women—they should all be sitting on School Boards, with spectacles on their noses, like a row of owls. Character! What's the use of character? You can't kiss force of character; but you can kiss Peggy Rosslyn."

"You mean *you* can."

"Well?" says Mrs. Threepenny-bit, with a stare. "Isn't that enough?"

"Hm! . . . However, it's Peggy Rosslyn, is it, you've fixed upon? Well, I shouldn't have called her so uncommonly pretty. Let's see. Her eyes—her eyes are rather glassy, aren't they?"

"I think they are most beautiful eyes," says this small creature, warmly. "Why, they have the clear shining blue of the eyes of a child!"

"Her nose is distinctly impertinent."

"You may call it impertinent, if you like; but that is merely the stupidity of the English language in not having a word to describe the prettiest shape of nose there is."

"We won't quarrel about her nose; there isn't enough of it to make a fuss about. And indeed if I were granting you everything—

that she is fairly good-looking, and has a tall and elegant figure, and a fresh complexion, and so forth—what does it amount to? When you come to her conduct, what are you to say? Why, you know she is a most outrageous and audacious and abominable flirt!”

Queen Tita condescends to smile a little.

“She is a mischievous monkey,” she admits.

“But it’s only her fun.”

“Her fun? A nice kind of fun. I call her simply a White Pestilence——”

“I’ll tell her you said so.”

“—a White Pestilence, stalking through the land, and scattering devastation wherever she goes.”

“And it’s little cause you have to complain, in any case,” she retorts; for she can shift her ground with dexterity. “No, it isn’t for you to complain of Peggy’s tricks. Who encourages her? Who is worse than anybody else? Why, the way you two go on is perfectly disgraceful. I declare, if I weren’t an angel——”

“But wait a bit. Who said you weren’t an angel? I want to know who said you weren’t an angel. Just you pass him this way. Hand him along. And then ask his aged mother to

come and see if she can recognise the fragments."

"It's all very well for you to make a joke of it; but if you would only think of those two grown-up boys, and the kind of example that is set before them——"

"I dare say the boys will be able to look out for themselves."

"If they take after their father, they will."

"Come, now, about Peggy. You know she has a way of expecting a good deal of attention."

"Yes; and men are never willing to pay her all the attention she wants! Oh, no, they are quite reluctant—you especially! Well, never mind, I'll take Peggy. I daresay we shall get on excellently by ourselves. But remember, Peggy is to be mine, and mine alone. Of course she will share my cabin at night; but I mean in the daytime as well—when we are walking along the bank, Peggy is to be with me; and if we go for a drive anywhere, she and I are to sit together. And won't you men be wild!"

"And won't you women be dull! But I don't know yet that I can allow a person of that kind to come with us. There is a good deal of moral obliquity about your peerless

Peggy. Look at the way she goes on at cards. You may call her 'a daughter of the gods, divinely tall,' but you can't say she's 'most divinely fair'; for she cheats at vingt-et-un like the very mischief."

"It's only her fun."

"Why, everything is only her fun! Is she to be allowed to do whatever she pleases so long as it amuses her? Besides, there are other considerations. She's a Yank."

"She's a dear!"

Obviously it was of no use to argue further with a woman who would make such irrelevant answers; for the sake of peace and quietness it was better to say "Very well"; and so it came about that it was resolved to ask Miss Peggy Rosslyn to accompany us when we should be ready to steal away from the busy haunts of men and begin our exploration of the devious water-ways in the west of England.

As it chanced, the Person without a Character—she who had been chosen simply because she was pretty and nice—who was supposed to have no mental or moral attributes whatsoever—no ambitions, opinions, affections, angularities, or sinister designs of any kind—this Characterless Person called upon us that after-

noon, and found some people chatting and drinking tea. And oh! so innocent she looked; and so demure were her eyes; and so reserved and courteous and complaisant her manner to these strange folk! Not any one of them, as it happened, had met her; not any one of them had been on terms of intimate friendship with her, and been allowed for a second—for the flashing fifteenth part of a second—to see in those innocent eyes a sudden and laughing confession of all her villainies and sins. What they saw was a tall, pleasant-looking, young American lady, of about eighteen or nineteen, fresher-complexioned than most of her countrywomen, and thoroughly well dressed. Perhaps one or other of the younger men, regarding her with greater interest, might have observed one of her small peculiarities—the grace of the action of her hands and wrists when she took anything up or put it down. It was a quite unconscious and natural habit she had of keeping her hand turned outward from the wrist, and hovering, as it were, before she touched anything, as a butterfly hovers before it settles. It may be added—without any great breach of confidence—that when Miss Peggy wanted to be very affectionate towards one of her women-friends,

or wanted to wheedle her out of something, she had a trick of holding her victim's head in those pretty white hands while she kissed her on both cheeks. A person who has gone through this ceremony several times informs the writer that she cannot think of anything it resembles so much as the soft closing together of a plover's wings when the bird first reaches the ground.

On this occasion it fell to the lot of a distinguished but far from elderly man of science to make himself agreeable to Peggy; and he did his best. He entertained her with an account of the Dodo. The Dodo, he said, was a Conservative bird, that became very much annoyed with the Radical new ways of its contemporaries—the sports of the various species, so to speak; and failing to convince them that they were conducting themselves shamefully, he simply left the world in disgust. That is what we do now with science; we make it entertaining for children. Peggy was a child; and had to be amused. And how could this youthful Professor know, when he was making himself pleasantly facetious, that those calm inquiring eyes were reading him through and through; that Peggy knew far more about human beings and their arts and

wiles and ways than he knew about snails and frogs ; and that, while he remained within reach of her glance, he was playing with a fire a hundred times more deadly than any ever invented by the Greeks ? However, in these pages there shall be naught set down in malice against the young lady who was to be our guest and companion during our long water-journey. The truth may have to be told ; but it shall be no more than the truth. And it is frankly admitted that on this afternoon Miss Peggy behaved herself very well. She was docile and agreeable to all. She did *not* sit in a corner with any one person for the whole time. As for the youthful Professor, he went away declaring that she was simply charming, though she did not seem to him to resemble the typical American girl ; from which we are to learn that sham metaphysics may by accident penetrate even into the sacred domain of science, and that a biologist may confess to a belief in those anæmic abstractions, those impossible phantoms, those fantastic fabrications of prejudice or prepossession—national types.

But when we discovered that Peggy had no engagement for that evening, and when she discovered that we were to be by ourselves,

she was easily persuaded to stay and dine with us; and forthwith—for the people had lingered on till nearly seven o'clock—the domineering mite who controls this household had carried her improvised guest away with her, to prepare for the banquet. And indeed when Miss Peggy took her seat at the table, the candid historian is bound to admit—though rather against his will—that she was pleasant to look at. One forgot the audacity of her nose in the general brightness of her face; and her eyes, whatever else they may have been, were distinctly good-humoured. She had a pretty underlip, too—a perfect rosebud in its way; and she had a habit of pursing her mouth piquantly when about to speak: when listening, on the other hand, in an attitude of pleased attention, her head a little forward, sometimes she would part her lips in a half-laughing way, and then there was a gleam of whitest pearl. Yes; simple honesty demands—or rather, extorts—the confession that there have been plainer young women than our Peggy, as she appeared on this evening; and the prospect of having her for a companion during our contemplated excursion was one to be endured.

And now we had to lay all our plans, incho-

ate as they still were, before our young friend, in the hope of enticing her to go with us. It was speedily found that very little enticement was necessary. When her hostess described to her our preconcerted and sudden withdrawal from the roar and turmoil and heated rooms of London—the assembling of the small party of friends on board the mysterious barge, as yet unconstructed and unnamed, that was to bear us away toward far western regions—our stealthy gliding through the silent land, in the pleasant May-time of the year—the ever-changing panorama of hill and wood and daisied meadow slowly going by—our morning walks along the banks—our moonlit evenings on deck, with perhaps a little music, of plantation birth—or, later still, a game of cards in the lamp-lit saloon: when all these things and many more have been put before her, the question comes—

“Now, Peggy, what do you say? Will you go with us?”

“Will I?” says Peggy. “Won’t I!”

And then she seems to think this answer too abrupt; and she goes round the table and kisses that small mite of a woman.

“You are just too good to me,” she says; and then she returns to her place.

"You will bring your banjo, Miss Peggy?"
says one of us.

"Oh, no!"

"Why not? Don't you ever perform out of London? Bell took her guitar with her when we drove the Phaeton northward."

"That is different," she says. "A guitar sounds all right. But a banjo would be out of keeping——"

"Oh, we can't get on without 'Kitty Wells' and 'Carry me back to Tennessee.'"

"There is a much more important thing," interposes Mrs. Threepenny-bit; and she eyes the young lady with severe and significant scrutiny. "We shall want a fourth for our party; and he may—I say *he may*—be a man; and even possibly a young man. Now, Peggy, I want to know if you are going to behave yourself?"

Miss Peggy turns to the third member of this trio, with appealing and innocent and injured eyes.

"Now, is that fair? Is that kind? Do I ever misbehave?"

"Never—I will swear it! But I see you know where to come to, you poor dear, when they say things about you. You know where sympathy and consolation are always waiting

for you. Don't you mind them—you come to me——”

“*Who called her a White Pestilence?*” says a hushed, small voice.

“What's that?” says Miss Peggy, whose ears are sharp enough.

“Oh, yes; you must bring your banjo,” one has to interpolate hastily. “Of course we can't do without ‘Kitty Wells,’ you know, and ‘Carry me back to Tennessee’——”

“*Who called her a White Pestilence?*” says the fiend again.

So this matter has to be faced.

“Well, you understand, Miss Peggy, there are some people whom you have to describe by opposites—the ordinary phrases of approval are not good enough—do you see?”

“Oh, yes, I see,” answered Miss Peggy; and there was very little indeed that that young woman was incapable of seeing. “I see that you have been talking about me. But I know you didn't believe half of what you said.”

“Of course not!—nor any of it.”

“Besides,” she continued, “if I go with you on this boating expedition, I shall be under your eyes from morning till night, and you'll see for yourself how good I am. Per-

haps you will believe then—and not listen to any stories!”

This last remark was addressed to Mrs. Threepenny-bit, who did not answer. She seemed doubtful about the young lady and her behaviour. However, we had booked Miss Rosslyn for that vagrant voyaging by canals and western rivers—that was the main point gained; and as she was pretty—that is, tolerably pretty—and as she had engaging manners, and as she was certified as possessing no character worth speaking about, all promised excellently well.

CHAPTER II.

“One day there chanced into these halls to rove
A joyous youth, who took you at first sight ;
Him the wild wave of pleasure hither drove,
Before the sprightly tempest-tossing light ;
Certes, he was a most engaging wight,
Of social glee, and wit humane though keen,
Turning the night to day, and day to night ;
For him the merry bells had rung, I ween,
If in this nook of quiet bells had ever been.”

THE first difficulty we encountered was to find a suitable name for the noble craft that was to carry us away into those sylvan solitudes. Here are some of the suggestions made to us ; and the reasons why we had to decline them :—

Converted Susan. This was the proposal of an ingenious young man who fancied we were going to take an ordinary canal-boat, and adapt it to our present needs ; and who intimated that a name of this kind would give a pious air to the undertaking. Of course we refused to sail under false colours.

The Snail. Appropriate, perhaps ; but not poetical.

Noah's Ark. Scouted unanimously ; we weren't going to have any beasts accompany us.

The Rose of Kentucky. This was a pure piece of sentiment on the part of Mrs. Three-penny-bit ; and therefore—and alas!—to be put aside.

The White Swan. This looked more promising ; and we even went the length of discussing the decoration of the vessel ; and asking whether a little symbolism might not be admissible—say, a golden beak at the prow, or something of the kind.

“ Oh ! no,” says Queen Tita, “ I wouldn't have any ornament at all. I would have the boat painted a plain white—a simple plain white, without any scrap of decoration.”

“ Surely that would be too severe,” says the aforementioned youth. “ Why, even the old book-worm who sent instructions to his binder : ‘ Let back and sides go bare, go bare ; but you may gild the top edges if you like ’—even he wasn't as strait-laced as that.” We knew there never was any such old book-worm ; and we resented this flippant treatment of a serious subject.

The *Water Speedwell*, the *Water Vole*, the *White Moth*, the *Velvet Shoe*, the *Phantom*, the *Pholas*, the *Vagary*: all these and a hundred more were examined and rejected; and we were growing desperate, when Miss Peggy Rosslyn, happening to come in one evening, settled the matter in a moment.

"If that is all the trouble," said she, "why not call it 'The Nameless Barge'?"

The Nameless Barge was the very thing we wanted—mysterious, ghost-like, and entirely in keeping with our secret and silent gliding along those solitary highways; and the Nameless Barge we forthwith declared it should be.

Now when we set about the planning and construction of the nondescript floating thing that was to be serviceable on both canals and rivers, we were greatly indebted for advice and assistance to a young friend of ours, who has already been incidentally mentioned. His name was Jack Duncombe; he was the son of a wealthy Manchester merchant, who had sent the lad to Harrow and Cambridge; thereafter the young man came to London to study for the Bar, took rooms in the Temple, ate his dinners, and eventually got called. But it was not the law that filled this young man's head, it was the drama; and he had actually

succeeded in getting one small piece produced, which was mercilessly mauled by the critics (of course, a conspiracy to crush aspiring genius). Busy as Jack Duncombe was, however, with plots and characters and epigrams, he found time for a good deal of idling; and as most of his idling was spent on the Thames, and as he was a universal favourite among riverside families during the summer months, he had acquired an intimate knowledge of all kinds of pleasure-boats. Not only that, but he was an exceedingly clever and handy fellow, and of the most indefatigable good nature; and when he heard of this project of ours, he quite naturally assumed that it was his business to procure for us the very vessel we wanted. Nothing seemed to diminish his unselfish industry and zeal; no obstacle was allowed to stand in his way. Consultations with boat-builders; correspondence with the secretaries of canal companies; laborious comparisons of designs; visits to Lambeth, to Staines, to Kingston; nothing appeared to come amiss to him. And yet one shudders even now to think of that cold river on a January day—the copper-coloured sun behind the milky clouds—the bitter wind coming over the frozen land and blowing harshly

down the stream—the shivering conversation on the icicled gangways—the inspection of this dismal house-boat and that one still dimmer. For surely there is nothing in the world more depressing than the appearance of a dismantled house-boat, shorn of its pretty summer adornments, and standing revealed in all its nakedness of damp-smelling wood, faded paint, and rusty metal-work. But our young dramatist was too much occupied to heed this melancholy contrast; he was busy with such things as the height of the cabin, the depth of keel, the quantity of ballast, the arrangement of the pantry, the construction of the berths; and at length, when all our inquiries were over, the commission was finally given; and it was agreed and undertaken that the Nameless Barge, painted a simple white, with no touch of colour or gilding at all, should be ready and waiting for us at Kingston-on-Thames, on May 1, with such stores on board as we might choose to send down beforehand.

Then says the mistress of this household—

“Mr. Duncombe has been so awfully kind and obliging over this affair that we are almost bound to ask him to go with us, if he can.”

“You know the certain result. Peggy will

make a hash of him within the first dozen hours."

"Oh no, no; this time she has promised to behave; and indeed I don't think she ever means very serious mischief. Besides, if anything were to happen, where would be the harm? That's what I thought when Peggy was with us at Venice, and Mr. Duncombe wrote saying he might perhaps come round that way. Of course, as we don't know the Rosslyns very well, it would be awkward if anything were to come about that they disapproved of while she was under our charge; and one can easily understand that people who have been very rich, and have lost nearly all their money, may be anxious that their daughter should marry well. I suppose that is natural. But, you see, we are quite safe with Mr. Duncombe, for he will have plenty; and there can be no other objection—he is clever, good-humoured, light-hearted, a favourite everywhere. I'm sure it is not to bring about a match that I suggested we should take either the one or the other; if they only knew, they would remain as they are—Peggy especially, with all the men her slaves, and people ready to pet her wherever she goes. However, as I

say, if anything were to happen, I don't see how the old people could disapprove. I suppose Mr. Duncombe will come into a large fortune."

"You may comfort yourself in one direction. Whatever happens, they won't hold you responsible. They have lived long enough with Miss Peggy to know that she is quite capable of managing her own affairs. She has got a will of her own, has that young woman."

"I can't understand why you always talk in that invidious way about Peggy," she says, in rather an injured tone: "you don't act up to it when she is here."

"Madam, there are such things as the sacred rites of hospitality; and when the representative of a nation allied to us by ties of blood—allied to us by all kinds of things—comes to our shores, of course we receive her as a guest."

"That's all very well," she says. "But we meet plenty of Americans; and yet I don't find you cutting a new pair of kid gloves to pieces when *they* happen to scratch their finger with a needle."

"Where is the chance? You don't suppose that the Americans, as a nation, are con-

tinually scratching their fingers on needle points? However, there is this to be said about asking Jack Duncombe to go with us, that he is a particularly handy fellow who will make himself useful. And Miss Peggy can beam on him if she chooses, by way of reward. Jack is used to that kind of favour, people say."

Accordingly we asked the budding dramatist to accompany us; and nothing loth was he; for he had always plenty of time on his hands, and ideas in his head, that wanted an abundance of leisure for the proper working of them out. And he would not hear of there being any difficulty about getting a factotum for our house-boat, a jack-of-all-trades, able to cook, and look after the cabins, and take a hand at the tiller when needed.

"Why," says Queen Tita, "where are you going to get the Admirable Crichton who can steer a boat, and boil potatoes, and black boots, and also wait at table?"

"Oh, that's all right," the young man said, gaily. "We'll advertise for somebody who has taken Mr. Longfellow's advice, and learned to labour and to wait."

She did not approve of this levity. She said:—"I think you'd better write to Mr.

Gilbert for the address of the sole survivor of the *Nancy Bell*—the man who was

‘The cook and the captain bold,
And the mate of the *Nancy* brig,
And the bos’un tight, and the midshipmite
And the crew of the captain’s gig—’

for short of that I don’t see how we are to get along.”

“I will undertake,” says this confident youth, “to get ‘not one, but all mankind’s epitome’—a person able to sew on buttons, cook the dinner, and drive the horse when the man falls drunk, as he is sure to do. Leave that to me.”

And then we told him about Peggy Rosslyn going with us.

“I’ve heard a great deal about that young lady,” said he. “It’s odd I’ve never met her at your house.”

“She spent all last winter in Paris,” Mrs. Threepenny-bit explains. “And since she has come to England, she has been mostly at Bournemouth, where she has some friends.”

“And is she really the adorable angel you all make her out?” he asks, with a certain air of indifference, not to say of incredulity.

“She is a very good girl, and a very nice

girl," says Queen Tita, quietly; for she doesn't like any of her young lady friends to be spoken of in a free-and-easy fashion, especially by young men.

Indeed, the next time Jack Duncombe called to see us, she took occasion to drop a little hint on this subject—in the gentlest possible way, of course. He came in radiant. He had been down to Kingston. The Nameless Barge was nearing completion. He was himself astonished at the amount of accommodation on board, seeing that she had to be constructed so as to enter canal locks and pass under bridges: nay, he was confident of her seagoing qualities, too, when we should have to face the wide waters of the Severn channel. According to him, the project no longer looked merely hopeful: its success was assured. He had discovered how to avoid Birmingham and all similar grimy districts. Our wanderings were to be purely pastoral and peaceful; the Thames, the Severn, the Kennet, the Avon, were to reveal to us their most secret haunts. He promised us that on some still evening—some warm and golden evening—perhaps dying slowly into dusk, and then re-awakening into the splendour and magic of a moonlight night—we should find

ourselves moored by a meadow-side, in the dim solitudes of the Forest of Arden.

"Yes," said he, "all you want now is a motto for the great scheme; and I've got that for you too. A motto!—why, it's a prophecy! Would you believe that Virgil clearly foresaw what you were going to do? Oh, yes, he did—he described it in a single phrase—in the Georgics."

"And what is it?" Queen Tita asks.

"*'Mellaque arundineis inferre canalibus,'*" he answers, apparently rather proud of his ingenuity.

"And the translation?" she asks again.

"The translation? Oh, that is clear enough. It means 'To carry Peggy Rosslyn along the reedy canals,'" he answers, as bold as brass.

"Really, now, what a dear, clever old man to have foreseen so much!" she says drily. And then she adds: "I suppose, now, it was the age of the poet that allowed him to speak in that familiar way. I am afraid that with our younger poets—the poets of our own generation—Peggy will have to be known as Miss Rosslyn."

"Oh, I will treat her respectfully enough, if you mean that," he says, with promptitude.

And yet even in giving this assurance he had somehow the manner of one conversant with the ways of young women, and accustomed to humour them, and manage them, and patronise them. And, no doubt, looking forward to the long excursion before him, and to the companionship of the young American lady of whom he had heard so much, he considered that it would be his duty to pay her some ordinary civility, and generally to look after her, and befriend her, if only as a little bit of amusement. Poor wretch—poor wretch!

CHAPTER III.

“By the rushy fringed bank
Where grows the willow, and the osier dank,
My sliding chariot stays.”

“THERE’S my dear! There’s my pretty one!” cries Queen Titania, as we drive up to Waterloo Station; forthwith one catches sight of a tall young lady, bright-eyed and smiling, coming quickly towards the cab; the next instant the two friends are together on the platform, kissing each other in the wasteful and foolish fashion peculiar to women. To the humble bystander it is left to regard Miss Peggy’s costume, which is quite admirable in its neatness and apparent inexpensiveness; of navy blue serge it is, with the jacket open in front and showing a vest of soft white merino with silver buttons. At present she wears a bonnet and gloves; but we know that she has with her a sailor’s hat

of cream-white straw; and we hope in due time, on board ship, to teach her the usefulness of bare hands.

The luggage having been looked after, the three of us get into a carriage.

"No, Peggy," says Queen Tita, gravely; "you needn't look round. He isn't here."

"Oh," says Peggy, with reproachful eyes, "as if I wanted anybody but you."

Therewith she takes her friend's hand in both of hers and presses it most affectionately; and then, sidling close to her on the seat, she interlinks their arms, and hugs her tightly, just as if these two were determined to go through the world together, unheeding all the rest of mankind. And as for the third person in this railway-carriage? Oh, his share in the whole performance is to pay. He may have laboured days and nights to get everything in readiness; he may have worn his eyes out in the perusal of Ordnance Survey maps; he may have spent untold gold on tinned meats and biscuits; and now he is of no more account; he may, if he pleases, buy a penny newspaper, retire into a corner of the carriage, and read the Parliamentary reports. But there is one reflection that cannot escape him: which is, that endearments between

women are the foolishest things on the face of this earth. They impose on no one. They afford no possible kind of satisfaction to the recipient of them; and there is not a man alive who does not see that they are a mere hollow pretence.

To return to business: our start, after all, was rather a haphazard affair, because some of our arrangements had broken down at the last moment. For one thing, the factotum of a steward provided by Jack Duncombe proved to be much too astute a person for simple folk like us. Doubtless he knew a great deal more about the Thames and about house-boats than we did; and we were willing, in a measure, to be instructed; but when it came to innumerable conditions and half-hinted stipulations, we had to point out to him, gently but firmly, that we did not at all look upon his going with us in the light of an obligation. Finally we had politely to request him to betake himself to the outermost edge of Limbo, himself and all his idiotic requirements; and then says Mrs. Threepenny-bit—

“Why, you know who are the only obliging race of people we have ever met! Where do we ever get courtesy and kindness and good-

will except in the West Highlands? If I were you I would send right away for Murdoch."

"A Highland steward on the Thames!"

"At all events he will be good-natured, and obliging, and pleasant-mannered. I'd rather have him on board than any of the confectioner-creatures you see at Henley Regatta. And so would you, Peggy, I know; for he is very good-looking, and you could fall back on him if there was no one else."

"Why do you say such things of me?" says our poor injured Peggy.

However, it was there and then resolved to send for Murdoch Maclean, of Tobermory, in the island of Mull; who came—sadly bewildered by the size and roar of London; and was at once sent on to Kingston. Thither also Jack Duncombe had gone down; for there was some little trouble about getting a man and horse to tow us up to Oxford—where more permanent arrangements were to be made. Thus it was that we three set forth by ourselves: two of us making ostentatious display of their silly affection for each other; the third driven in self-defence to the invertebrate garrulities of the House of Commons.

As the train slowed into Kingston Station,

we perceived a young gentleman eagerly scanning the carriages. He was a straight-limbed, slimly-built young fellow, of pale complexion, with good features, intelligent grey eyes, chestnut-brown hair, and a small brown moustache. He wore a blue jacket, white ducks, and yachting-shoes.

"Peggy," said the elder of the two women, as they stepped out and on to the platform, "let me introduce to you Mr. Duncombe—Miss Rosslyn."

The quick look of surprise that appeared on the young man's face! Had our familiar speaking about Peggy deceived him? Perhaps he was not prepared to find this American young lady so distinguished-looking, and so calm and self-possessed; to say nothing of the observant, direct glance of her clear shining eyes. Miss Peggy bowed complacently and not unkindly; and the young man, recovering a little from his embarrassment, turned to his hostess and explained that he had a youth below and a barrow for the transference of our luggage, and that he had left Murdoch in charge of the boat. Then these two, the luggage having been carried down, walked on ahead; leaving Miss Peggy to follow with the only companion left her.

"Well?" one says to her, by way of encouragement and inquiry.

She does not care to look up in answer: you would think she was quite interested in the dusty road before her.

"Well?"

And then Miss Peggy slowly raises her eyes, when she has had time to make them quite inscrutable. It is a trick she has when she dares you to read any meaning into them.

"Well?"

"What is it?" she says, with the most beautiful innocence; though there is the smallest, faintest curve at the end of her lips that speaks of a dark concealment.

"What do you think of him?"

"Of your friend?" she says artlessly; and she glances ahead. "Oh, well, I think he is rather good-looking; that is all one can say as yet."

"Miss Peggy, are you going to let him alone?"

Again the plaintive, injured look.

"I didn't think you were going to accuse me of such things, even in fun. You are always kind to me—and—and defending me against everybody. Besides, didn't I tell you

you would see for yourself, all the day long, how well I behave?"

"But you mustn't behave too well, Miss Peggy; that would never do; we might begin to think you had some definite kind of a character about you. Don't you know what made that small woman there determined to inveigle you into going with us? It was because you had no angles of character at all; because you were nothing but simply nice."

"Did she say I was nice?" she inquires, with a touch of shyness.

"She did."

"And did you agree with her?" asks this bold hussy—showing what her shyness is worth.

"I? Oh, well, that's asking questions, and too soon. You know what the man said who went off in a balloon by himself; he said 'This is very nice, *I hope!*' We'll see, Miss Peggy. We'll have a little scrutiny of your conduct before saying anything definite. We'll give you a written warranty afterwards."

"And that is all you trust me?" says Miss Peggy, looking very, very much hurt and aggrieved. "Well, then, I will tell you this: sometimes I imagine it is you who say all those wicked things about me, while professing

to be my friend the whole time. I believe it is your wife who is my real friend ; and that it is you who put suspicions into her mind. But I will show you how wrong you are. I will just show you how wrong you are. And then, when you are heartily ashamed of yourself, I hope you will apologise."

"I will."

At this moment Miss Peggy is regarding those other two in front : a smile begins to hover about her lips ; the faintest dimple appears in her cheek ; but her eyes are inscrutably grave. She turns towards her companion.

"Yes ; he *is* rather good-looking. Don't you think so ? " she says.

"You villain ! "

No other protest is possible ; for here we are down at the river ; and there is the long white thing—an elongated Noah's Ark—a white-washed gondola it seems—that is to be our home for many a day. And here is Murdoch come ashore—a sailor-like, sun-burned young fellow, who has made himself smart in his steward suit and peaked cap ; he is very bashful before the young lady stranger ; he waits to be spoken to by Queen Tita, who is an old friend and seafaring comrade of his.

"Well, Murdoch," says she, "and what do you think of the boat, now you have seen her?"

Murdoch glances towards the Nameless Barge with evident disfavour; but he is too courteous to say anything too disparaging.

"I thought, Mem, it wass to be a yat," he says, still regarding that long white eel of a thing.

"A yacht? Oh, no. We couldn't take a yacht away inland. Why," she says, with a smile, looking at him, "I believe you are quite disappointed!"

"Oh, no, Mem. Maybe it is a good boat for the purpose—maybe it uz. But I would not like for us to be going round Ru Hunish in *that*."

"I dare say not. But she could lie at anchor well enough in the Sound of Ulva, couldn't she? You remember the place, Murdoch?"

There is a quick look of pleasure in Murdoch's clear, dark-blue eyes.

"Ay, indeed, Mem; it wass many's the time we were in there; and a nice place it wass to be in, Mem, when the Gometra men did not forget to bring us bread from the steamer."

"Murdoch, this is Miss Rosslyn; she is an American young lady, who wants to see all about England, you know; and you'll have to do everything to make her comfortable while she is on board."

"Oh, yes, Mem; but I wish the young leddy wass going with us on a yat, Mem," says Murdoch, rather pathetically: it is clear that he regards our present expedition as a sad falling off from others he has known in former days.

Queen Tita looks at him and laughs a little.

"I do really believe, Murdoch, you are sorry you came south!"

"Oh, no, Mem; indeed not that, Mem," says this bashful-eyed young fellow (who would scarcely even look Peggy's way). "I am sure I do not care what kind of a boat it uz, if you will ask me to go, Mem; and it's ferry glad I am to be going with you, Mem, whateffer the kind of boat."

It was a pretty speech, in intention; and may have helped to put that sprat of a creature into an amiable frame of mind. At all events, when we got the two women bundled on board, disappointment was not the mood in which they took possession of their new quarters.

They were simply delighted with everything ; could not express their admiration of all the cunning little arrangements ; must needs ransack the pantry, and overhaul the cooking apparatus ; were astonished at the convenience and snugness of the berths ; and then, when it was intimated to them that the saloon forward, when not required for meals, was to be their own especial boudoir, into which meaner members of the company might occasionally be admitted on invitation, you should have seen how naturally Queen Tita began to roll up the red silk blinds of the small windows, so as to let plenty of light in, and Miss Peggy, taking her banjo from its case, at once found a hook where it could hang.

“ We must get some flowers for the table,” said Miss Peggy.

“ God grant I have no need of *thee* ! ” remarked her friend, addressing the waterproof that she was folding up for stowage in the rack.

They were at home at once. They sat down opposite each other, to admire all the cheap Tottenham-court-road finery around them—the Utrecht velvet cushions, the mirrors, the sconces, and what not ; and they had no word of complaint against the character of the decoration.

"Well, I do think this is very comfortable," says the elder of them.

"I call it perfectly charming," says the younger.

"I am sure we are very much obliged to Mr. Duncombe—where is he?" And then she cries: "Why, I declare we're moving!"

There could be no doubt of the fact; for a glance out at the forward window showed that we were being towed across the river by a small boat pulled by two men. And of course the women must needs see the start; and as that forward window was found to open on to a space of deck at the bow, they had no difficulty in getting out there, and commanding an excellent view of all that was going on.

Where was Jack Duncombe all this time? Why, he was steering. He was responsible for all the arrangements of our setting-forth; and his air was serious, not to say important. He had neither word nor look for the women-folk; and they, of course, knew better than to talk to the man at the wheel. They humbly looked on as he got the boat close to the bank, and, springing ashore, proceeded to get ready the towing-line. The horse, adorned with bows of ribbon, was there, waiting; so was the

driver. We should start in a minute at furthest.

But alas ! for our assiduous and serious-eyed young friend. No sooner is the line attached than the gaily-decorated steed appears to think he ought to do something ; and what he does is far from what we want him to do. He proceeds to dance around on his hind legs, scattering the small boys who have assembled, and paying no heed at all to the man, who clings desperately to his head. It is a humiliating spectacle—a beast pawing the air in that fashion, as if he were imitating a bear at a show. Our women-folk are too ashamed to laugh ; but Mr. Duncombe, no doubt, assumes that they are laughing ; and very angry he becomes.

“ Wo ! you confounded beast ! Come down, you brute ! ” And then he says to the man ; “ What did your master mean by sending us a fool of a horse like this ? We’re not going to take a circus through the country. This is a nice sort of creature for a canal tow-path ! ”

Then, amid these gambols, *crack !* goes something.

“ Look here, now ! ” our young friend calls to the driver, who is still hanging on to the animal’s head. “ Here is this thing broken !

You'll have to go back. Take this kangaroo home, and bring us a horse. Get away, you idiot ! ”

This last ejaculation is caused by his having to skip aside from the lively pair of heels—an undignified movement, at the best. The driver, a tall young man, gaunt of face, clad in a suit of pilot cloth, and wearing a skipper's hat—we called him Palinurus the moment we set eyes on him—proceeds to unhitch the rope from the broken harness ; and then, in a melancholy manner, leads away the disgraced, beribboned prancer. Jack Duncombe comes on board. The women don't say anything. He pretends that all is not quite ready for our departure. He consults Murdoch about the stowage of the portmanteaus ; and then these two disappear within the Noah's Ark. The women's faces remain demure.

And yet we made a sufficiently pleasant start, after all, when a second horse—a large-boned white animal, with bushy mane and tail—was brought along and yoked ; and glad enough were we when the vibration of the long, tight line and the swishing of water at the bows told us we were really off. It was a cheerful morning, too ; for if there was no positive sunlight, there was a white glare of

heat; the birds were twittering everywhere; the swallows skimming and darting over the surface of the silver-rippling river. Of course this was rather a well-known panorama that was now gliding silently by—the Surbiton villas among their abundant gardens, with here and there a boating party embarking, and here and there a rose-red sunshade visible under the young green of the trees; and, indeed, some of us may have been wishing that we could get the Thames part of our voyage over and done with, and set forth upon less familiar waters. But this we had to remember, that with us was a young American stranger, to whom everything was new, who had an eager interest in places with historical associations, and who was most amiably disposed to be pleased with everything she saw. Hampton Court was not at all “ ‘Appy ‘Ampton ” for our Miss Peggy; it was the palace that Henry VIII. gave to Cardinal Wolsey; and she seemed surprised that we did not propose to stop at a place enriched with so many memories.

“ Well,” says Mrs. Threepenny-bit, in the midst of our learned discourse, “ I am going inside to talk to Murdoch about lunch. You,” she says, to the humble chronicler of these

events, "you can stay here and entertain Peggy with English history. History—yes—that's what they call it."

"What does she mean?" says Peggy, with artless eyes.

But just as if to rebuke the malignant levity of women—who think of nothing but their own wretched little jibes and jeers among the serious cares and duties of life—not more than a minute after that we found ourselves out in the middle of the river Thames, helplessly adrift, and with no visible means of reaching either shore. For at Hampton Court the tow-path changes to the Surrey side; Palinurus had unhitched the line without leaving sufficient way on the boat to enable us to shoot the bridge; we had no oars; and the two poles we had on board could not reach the bottom. This was a pleasant predicament; and yet here was one woman looking on in mild amusement at our frantic efforts to save her worthless life; and the other woman, rejoicing, no doubt, in the feeble sarcasm with which she took her leave, busy with such inanities as plovers' eggs and pigeon-pie. By what superhuman endeavours we got that boat over to the other shore needs not to be described here; we found Palinurus peacefully,

if furtively, smoking his pipe ; and Coriolanus—why we called him Coriolanus we never could make out ; but it seemed natural, somehow—Coriolanus was nibbling at the grass on the bank. Presently, the line had been attached again, and our silent progress resumed ; and then, when we had disposed of the rough-and-tumble business of getting through Moulsey Lock, a silver tinkling was heard within, which we knew to be Murdoch's summons to lunch ; and Miss Peggy, forsaking history—yes ; history—for the moment, was pleased to descend from her commanding position at the prow, and take her place at the oblong little table in the saloon.

Now this was the first occasion on which those two young people had really been thrown into each other's society ; and it may be said at once that Queen Tita's fears, if she had ever seriously entertained any, ought to have been dissipated forthwith. Miss Peggy took not the least notice of the young man ; she did not even look his way ; you would have thought she was not aware of his existence. You see, she was much interested in hearing about Cardinal Wolsey's gold and silver plate, and his more than regal hospitalities ; and she was very curious about the gentlewomen

who now occupy rooms in Hampton Court Palace; and wanted to know all about their circumstances and ways of life. As for Jack Duncombe, he devoted himself entirely to his hostess; and of course he talked of nothing but this blessed boat.

"Well, you know," he was saying, "we must make little mistakes sometimes; an excursion of this kind can't be done right off the reel. If it had been quite easy to do, everybody would have done it. And, besides, this isn't the least like an ordinary house-boat. The ordinary house-boat, as you know, is a great big unwieldy thing, with a square stem; you don't go voyages in her; you contract to get her moved for you, when you want her moved; and then you take down your party of friends, and have sky-larkings. I suppose the builder fancied those boat-hooks would be long enough for all practical purposes; but wait till we get to Staines, and then I'll look about for a right sort of pole. We live and learn. If the people at Hampton Court thought us duffers, they were welcome. We got the boat across, anyway."

"Oh, but you mustn't apologise," she says kindly. "I'm sure our start has been most successful. And I'm sure, too, that Miss

Rosslyn will be delighted with our English scenery, just when it is at its freshest and brightest."

Miss Rosslyn was engaged at the moment—with history.

"It will be far more interesting," the young man said, "when we get away into the unknown districts. It will be the most solitary expedition you can imagine. You know, the railways have in many places bought up the canals; and these are almost disused now; if we only can get along, it will be the loneliest trip you ever tried. I hope we are all very good-natured."

"Peggy," she says suddenly, "are you very good-natured?"

Peggy looks up, startled.

"No, thank you; I won't have anything more," she says.

And then—not noticing the fiendish grin on the face of the woman who pretends to be her friend—Miss Peggy continues—

"Oh, isn't it beautiful!—and the delicious silence—you can't tell how you are going—it feels like a kind of enchantment. That window," she says, regarding the larger one at the bow, "has just the proportions of an upright landscape; and if you sit where I am,

you see simply a succession of Corots—those tall poplars, and the glassy stream, and the white sky. I could not have imagined anything so delightful. It is like being wafted through the air——”

“If you’ve all finished,” says Jack Duncombe—to whom Miss Peggy’s remarks were *not* addressed—“I’ll take a turn at the tiller, and let Murdoch come in to clear away.”

So we left the women to the enjoyment of their Corots—or to helping Murdoch, as they felt inclined; and betook ourselves to cigars and steering astern.

Well, it was pleasant enough: the gentle motion; the silence—save for the thrushes and blackbirds; the suffused sunlight; the cool swish of the water along the boat; the gliding by of the placid English landscape, green with the verdure of the opening summer. And perhaps we enjoyed this luxurious idleness all the more that we knew there were harder days ahead of us—days of fighting with low bridges, and opening and closing untended locks; days of distant wanderings and privation, perhaps of anxious responsibility and care. At present our duties were mostly confined to taking a turn at the helm; for as the steersman had to stand on an im-

provided thwart in order to see over the roof of the house—with his arms supported by the iron stanchions meant for an awning—that spreadeagle attitude could not be maintained for any great length of time. Of course, we ought to have had gear arranged by which the boat could have been steered from the forward deck; but we could not think of everything at the last moment; besides, why should the occupants of the saloon have their Corots spoiled for them by the interposition of a man's legs?

But if our adventure at Hampton Court was unfortunate, our escapade at Shepperton was entirely lamentable and ignominious. Here the tow-path shifts to the Middlesex side, and the horse has to cross by ferry; and here, once more, Palinurus detaching the rope prematurely, we were left helpless in mid-stream, with a strong current carrying us down. Now, a man may use a boat-hook as an oar, even as he may use a walking-stick in place of an umbrella; but neither will avail him much; accordingly, we found ourselves drifting broadside on to an island.

“Kott pless me!” we heard Murdoch muttering to himself as he was vainly endeavouring to reach the bottom with one of these

sticks, "What iss to be done with a boat like *thus*?"

Then a man comes running along the bank.

"Throw us a line, guv'nor!"

Jack Duncombe, who is at the bow, coils up the towing-rope, and heaves it, just getting it ashore. The next instant our opportune friend (his soul no doubt exultant with hopes of a shilling and subsequent beer) has got the line looped round his shoulders; gradually he gets a little way on the boat; Murdoch has to take the tiller again; and in this humiliating fashion we gain entrance to Shepperton Lock.

That was a beautiful afternoon, still and calm and summer-like, up by Chertsey Mead and Laleham. There was not a breath of wind to ruffle the smooth-flowing river; and the perfect reflections of the trees and bushes—in warm hues of yellow-green and olive—were only disturbed when the towing-line dipped and hit the surface into a shimmering silver-white. It was a peaceful landscape; very English-looking; in the distance there was a low line of wooded hill, with here and there a church-spire appearing among the trees.

"Really," says Mrs. Threepenny-bit, as we

are getting into Penton Hook Lock, "really I am quite ashamed to see so much of the work falling upon Mr. Duncombe's shoulders. He never gets a moment's rest."

"He likes it. He is proud of his position as sailing-master."

She turns to Miss Peggy.

"Peggy," she says, "you might at least go and talk to him while he is at the tiller."

"I don't know Mr. Duncombe," says Miss Peggy, looking down; "I'm sure he would rather have you go and talk to him."

"And leave you two to get back to your English history—is that what you want? Well, anyway, I have to go and see if Murdoch is making preparations for dinner."

"You'd better leave Murdoch alone," it is here interposed. "He has had his hands pretty full all day; don't bother him about dinner now."

"Are we to starve?"

"It would do you good, once in a while."

"I like to hear men talk like that! We know what goes on at their clubs, don't we, Peggy? Yes, and at the dinners of the City Companies, and the Mansion House, and the Royal Academy—why, everything, anything, is an excuse for the most wasteful extrava-

gance. However, there's one thing: if there is to be no dinner, it isn't Peggy and I who will suffer the most. We shan't complain; shall we, Peggy?"

"I don't know," says Peggy, irresolutely.

"If you would only wait a moment," says the person whose sole business in life seems now to be pulling out eighteenpences to pay successive lock-keepers, "I would explain. We shall get up to Staines about half-past seven or eight; and we must go ashore to buy a proper pole. Very well; we can dine at the old Pack-Horse before coming on board again; and save a heap of trouble. Now do you understand? Can your diminutive intellect grasp that situation?"

"It would have been so nice to have dined on board," she says.

"You will get plenty of dining on board before we have done with you. Wait till you find yourself in the Forest of Arden."

"I suppose travellers must be content," she says humbly; and then she turns to Miss Peggy. "Well, if you won't go and talk to Mr. Duncombe, I will. I am sure we should all be very much obliged to him."

It was nearer eight than half-past seven when we reached Staines, and found a safe

mooring for the Nameless Barge. The labours and experiences of this our first day were over, and we went ashore in a placid frame of mind. The twilight was darkening to dusk now; but the thrushes and blackbirds were still piping everywhere.

Dinner ordered at the old familiar Pack-Horse, one or two of us went out on to the little balcony overlooking the river. The evening was very still. There was a curious metallic grey on the surface of the stream; and as we stood regarding it, a single bronze-hued boat went noiselessly by, floating down with the current; and in the stern of the boat, sitting very close together, were two young people, who might have been ghosts gliding through the mysterious gloom.

"Doesn't it remind you of those nights in Venice?" says Miss Peggy, rather absently.

And then, behold! far above the darkness of the trees, there is the young moon, of a pale silver, in the lilac-tinted skies; and in the closing down of the night the birds are still calling.

CHAPTER IV.

“Marie, have you forgotten yet
The loving barter that we made?
The rings we changed, the suns that set,
The woods fulfilled with sun and shade?
The fountains that were musical
By many an ancient trysting-tree—
Marie, have you forgotten all?
Do you remember, love Marie?”

It is early morning—calm and clear; a pale sunlight lies over the green landscape; the masses of foliage are mirrored on the smooth waters of the stream. There is quietude on board this gently-gliding boat; for Jack Duncombe has gone ashore to walk with the driver; Murdoch is in the pantry; the two women are also within; and the helmsman, left solitary at his post, has little to do but listen to the universal singing of the birds, and also to look out for shallows.

But the quietude is suddenly broken; a woman appears—a small woman—apparently

half inclined to laugh, and yet as fierce as a bantam.

"And what do you think of yourself now?" she says.

"I am pretty well, I thank you," is the properly civil answer to this polite inquiry.

"Why, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"But I am."

"Why do you do it, then?"

"Do what?"

"Oh, of course you don't know how you were going on last night—both of you. In all my life I never saw two human beings make such an exhibition of themselves. I wish you could have seen yourself, and her too"—continues this wildly imaginative and wholly unveracious person, whose testimony the kind reader of these pages will doubtless estimate at its proper value—"the underhand talking, eyes fixed on eyes, the sniggering at small jokes that no one else was allowed to hear. And then the pretty dear must give you that little bouquet of pansies; and, of course, you couldn't pin it on for yourself—oh, no, a man's fingers are so clumsy; and, of course, she must lean over to do it for you, and be about half an hour in doing it—I wish

someone had knocked your two heads together. Then comes out the cigar-cutter—oh, yes, she saw it in Paris, and thought the combination of silver and gold rather pretty, and had your initials engraved on it; and, of course, you can't be behindhand when it is a question of love-gifts; you go and give her the silver pen-holder you have had for years, and that you promised to Edward——”

“What!”

“The boy would have prized it, and treasured it all his life; and that minx will throw it away, or give it to the first young numskull she finds in her train. I do wonder that men will make such idiots of themselves—for nothing but a pretty-face. A smooth cheek and a pair of baby eyes—that's enough. That's all that's wanted; and they seem to be knocked silly, and are ready to believe anything. Why, if you only knew! Don't you see that she is merely playing you off against Mr. Duncombe? It's all done to pique him. That's the way she begins. All these secret confidences—and the attention she pays to your slightest word—and all her unblushing coquetry—that is all done to tantalise him. That cigar-cutter: she has had it ever since she came over from Paris; why

did she wait till last night before giving it to you in that marked way?"

"I suppose young ladies have a right to open their portmanteaus when they please?"

"At all events, you needn't encourage her in her mischief. Oh, I saw your tricks! That's a very pretty one you've taught her of looking into each other's eyes while you're clinking wine-glasses. Pledging friendship, I suppose! Friendship! And then that stupid old conundrum—What kind of weather represents an animal? Rain, dear!—of course you asked her that just to be allowed to call her dear. I could see what was going on——"

"Doubtless!"

"—although I had to talk to Mr. Duncombe all the time. And mark my words, as soon as she has provoked Mr. Duncombe into paying her attention—as soon as she has got him in a fair way of becoming her slave—I wonder where you will be! Where will be all her devotion, and her flattering smiles, and her make-believe gratitude, and her ready laughing at the most ridiculous jokes; where will all that be—then?"

"Where, indeed! With the snows of yesteryear. But in the meantime, while

Heaven vouchsafes such mercies, one mustn't throw them away, don't you see?"

"Heaven! It's very little you know about Peggy Rosslyn if you think that Heaven has anything to do with her."

Just as this atrocious sentiment (which will reveal to young men what the friendship of women, as between themselves, is worth) has been uttered, there is suddenly heard the tinkling of a banjo within the saloon—a careless strumming, apparently to test the strings. Then we hear a girl's voice, also quite careless; and we can just make out something about

"My old Kentucky home far away."

The next instant the door opens, and Miss Peggy, without her banjo, but radiant, and fresh as a wild rose in June, and smiling content with herself and all the world, comes out into the daylight.

"I wish I had brought some more strings from home; they're better than those you get in England——"

Suddenly Miss Peggy stops, and glances from one to the other. She is a sharp-eyed young woman.

"What is it?" she says, looking puzzled.

And then—well, the writer of these lines

hardly hopes to be believed, but this is actually what happens—the woman who has been talking so abominably about this girl-friend of hers hesitates for but a second; perhaps there is a kind of fascination in the fresh young face, or a mute appeal in the puzzled eyes; at all events, she goes quickly forward, and laughs a little, and draws Peggy's arm within her own, and forthwith makes use of these words:—

“Peggy, dear, I'm going to tell you a secret. Be warned by me, and have nothing to do with men. They're perfidious, every one of them. If you only knew their selfishness, and the way they laugh at any trust you may be so foolish as to put in them! Now, women do try to be honest with each other. You may expect a woman's affection and friendship to last, for a while at least; but a man's—never! They'll simply amuse themselves with you—for the moment—and pass on. That's the way with *men*.”

Now, as there was only one man present (who scorned to notice these taunts), it was but natural that Peggy should turn to him; and there was more than interrogation in her eyes. There was a great deal more than interrogation in those remarkably shrewd and

intelligent eyes. There was—but never mind. She was a discreet young creature, and held her tongue; and she pretended to be grateful for this disinterested advice; and found something the matter with her friend's neckerchief, so that, in putting it straight, she could stroke and pet her a little. For a perfectly Characterless Person, Miss Peggy had ways.

Then says the smaller of the two women:

"Look here, Peggy, no one seems to take any notice of Mr. Duncombe, though he is working so hard for us. He has been quite by himself ever since breakfast. What do you say—shall we go ashore and walk with him for a bit?"

"Please, I want to be shown how to steer," says Peggy, timidly.

"And consider this, Miss Peggy," observes the third person present, "You'll be coming to Runnymede very soon——"

"Not the real Runnymede!" she says, quickly.

"The actual and veritable meadow where the barons met; and you'll see the place where King John waited on the other side; and the island between, where Magna Charta was signed."

"Now Heaven grant me patience, for

they're at their English history again!" says Mrs. Threepenny-bit, apparently to herself; and then she opens the door behind her, and calls: "Here, Murdoch, come and get ready the gang-board; I'm going ashore."

And she did go ashore, uttering the while covert jibes and jeers the unworthy nature of which will be made manifest directly. For when Miss Peggy had been shown how to cling gracefully to the iron bar, and how to move the tiller with her bronze-slippered mite of a foot, the conversation took quite an unexpected turn, and had nothing to do with English history.

"Now that we're quite alone," said Peggy, "I wish you would tell me something. I've often thought of asking you; I think you could tell me as well as anyone."

"What is it, then?"

"Well, I want to know if books are like real life."

This was an amazing question.

"It is to be hoped that real life isn't like some books," one answers, trying to escape.

"I don't mean that," she says; "I mean generally. Do you think books represent things as ordinary people find them? Do you think you would find in the actual world

around you people capable of so much self-sacrifice, and so much kindness to the weak and poor; and men doing heroic things for the sake of the love of a woman—I don't mean fighting and bloodshed, but constancy in time of trial, and so on? Don't you think that in the real world money is more important than they make it out to be in books? You know quite well that there are people who will frankly tell you their opinion, at least, that money is everything, and romance and love and all that mere moonshine. Now, if you take this case, if you suppose a young man engaged to a girl—or as good as engaged; the two families taking it almost for granted—and if he seems inclined to throw her over because it turns out she has not as much money as he expected—or none at all, let us say—you would consider that he was only doing what was right, and prudent, and usual, what everyone else would do in his place? People would call him sensible, and say he was quite right, wouldn't they? "

Now, the writer of these pages has been studying men and women for a goodly number of years; and has managed to get considerably befogged, especially about women; but surely it needs no very profound knowledge of

human nature to perceive that this young lady, while seemingly concerned about the sincerity of literature, was in reality thinking of one particular young man. And of course no one could be expected to offer an opinion in such a delicate affair, especially on such insufficient data. It was a good deal safer to tackle the general question. And it was easy to point out to this ingenuous young creature that no single human being's estimate of the world at large was of much value to any other human being. You form your opinion from a certain limited number of friends and acquaintances, who are mostly of your own choosing; that contracted sphere you have in a great measure made up for yourself. And like draws to like. "The world," said Mr. Thackeray, "is a mirror in which each man sees the reflection of his own face." It was especially pointed out to this meek disciple that she should not seek for any such information as she desired from a person born and brought up in a country whose ballads and songs and tales and family histories seemed to show that there human life, and more particularly matrimonial alliances, had not always been conducted on strictly commercial principles. On these and other

weighty themes the discourse is going on pleasantly enough; Miss Peggy's clear blue eyes are grown somewhat pensive; and the bronze-slipped foot is idly swaying the tiller, when all of a sudden there is a grating sound—a ghastly sound too easily recognised—a hurried yell is sent forward to Palinurus—there is a still harsher sound, and a terrible vibration of the boat—the straining line hauls her over—and just as Miss Peggy and her companion are wondering what is going to “give” first, the towing-rope is slackened, and we find the Nameless Barge fixed firmly on a long and shelving shallow, nearly opposite Magna Charta island.

“Oh, Miss Peggy, what will they say of you now?”

Miss Peggy flushes quickly, and yet there is a half-hidden laugh in her eyes.

“I know what your wife will say; but it wasn't so, was it? Really I wasn't looking——”

“Certainly you weren't.”

“Well, why didn't you tell me that shallow place was there?”

“Why did you run the bow into the bank?”

“Oh, here they come: we shall have to face it somehow.”

I suppose it is a very amusing thing for two grinning idiots to stand on the bank of a stream, and mock at people who have got into trouble. "How about Robert Fitz-Walter? Where did King John go after the Charter was signed?" one of them kept asking; and that feeble sort of sarcasm seemed to give her great delight. The worst of it was that we in the boat tried our very hardest to get her shoved off, and without avail; and Murdoch, by the expression of his face, seemed to say he was more than ever convinced that this mongrel craft was fit for neither land nor water. In the end Coriolanus had to be brought back; the towing-line was hitched on astern; and in this ignominious fashion we were dragged off the shoal. When we resumed our voyage, Miss Peggy and her companion had neither word nor look for the people ashore. They were welcome to their thin facetiousness. Two souls, always congenial, seemed to be drawn more and more to each other by having had to pass through the valley of humiliation; and Peggy, relinquishing the tiller, went and got her banjo, and came and ensconced herself in the stern-sheets, and began to sing—"The sun shines bright in the old Kentucky home." She had

a pretty contralto voice, of pure and sympathetic quality; and she sang low and softly, for of course we did not choose that those two people ashore should overhear.

Then Peggy—Miss Peggy, I mean—sang “Sweet Belle Mahone”; and then she sang, “Hard Times come again no More”; and then she sang “The Little Old Log-Cabin in the Lane.” And all the while the water was rippling at the prow of the boat; and the summer-green landscape went gliding by in the happy silence; envy, spite, and jealousy were far away (walking along the bank, that is), and here were peace and content, and the communion of two kindred souls.

“Peggy, will you put down your banjo for a moment and come up here?”

She does as she is bid; for she is an obedient lass, when there is no one by to provoke her or frighten her. And this that she has been summoned to see—the spectral grey thing rising high over the wide rich-foliaged landscape? That spectral grey thing is the stately pile of Windsor Castle; and at the Round Tower floats the Royal Standard of England.

“Do you know what that means, Miss Peggy? The Queen is there just now.”

"What," she says, "actually there—living in that building?"

"Undoubtedly."

She is silent for a moment or two.

"Well," she says, "I suppose you can't understand how strange that is to me. I dare say it's nothing to you. You see the Queen driving past in her carriage; and you read about her in the newspapers. But to us at home—to an American girl at least—the Queen of England seems to belong to a long line of Kings and Queens; to be one of a series of historical characters that one has read about so much; well, I can't explain it to you; but it does seem odd to think that she's only a woman, after all, and living over there in that house."

"They say you are rather fond of English history?"

Let no man think that he can catch Miss Peggy unawares. There is a flash of a laugh in her eyes, but only for a second; the next instant she lets herself down into the stern-sheets and demurely takes up her banjo again.

"They may say so if they like," she says, as she strikes the first "whirr" across the strings. "But you must not say anything

of that kind. For you always defend me."

It was at the entrance to Windsor Home Park, where we were charged ninepence for permission to pass along this portion of the river (to the young Republican mind there seemed something very incongruous in this transaction, but no more incongruous than the costume of the Royal gate-keeper, who was in his shirt-sleeves, and wore a tall hat with gold braid round it), it was at this point that Mrs. Threepenny-bit and her companion came on board again; and very anxious was the former to ascertain what Miss Peggy had been talking about when we ran aground opposite Magna Charta island.

"Oh! well," said Peggy, evasively, "a lot of things. And one can't learn to steer all at once. Besides, who would have expected the water to be so shallow?"

"Oh! but I must tell you this," said Jack Duncombe, with some eagerness, "that shoal is well known to everybody familiar with the Thames. It is one of the worst on the river. And, of course, you couldn't be expected to know, Miss Rosslyn; it was simply a piece of bad luck that you happened to be steering at the time."

Miss Rosslyn looked rather pleased that he should have come so warmly to her assistance; but she did not say anything.

So on we went towards Eton College—the old red and grey building looking as picturesque as ever among its abundant elms and willows and chestnuts; we got through Romney Lock with a moderate amount of bumping; and then we halted for lunch by the side of a long breakwater, where we found a serviceable post. It is true that we also found a notice warning any boat or barge of the awful consequences that would ensue, if it moored by “this Cobler”; but then we had no idea what a Cobler was.

“Very well,” said our young dramatist, with an oracular air; “a thing of which you are entirely ignorant has for you no existence; and surely for mooring to a thing that has no existence, you can’t reasonably be prosecuted.”

We had no time to stay and consider this proposition; for we were all desperately hungry; and Murdoch had done his best for us.

Now during this repast—which was enjoyable enough, for the day was fine and clear and still; the stream was scarcely heard in the prevailing silence; and we seemed to be

quite alone in the world, though one could catch a glimpse, through certain of the windows, of a few river-side cottages; while far away and above these rose the ethereal grey mass of Windsor Castle, with the gorgeously-coloured standard floating idly in the summer air—during this meal it was impossible to avoid imagining that our young friend the dramatist was trying to show off a little. At any time he was a merry youth, light-hearted, clever-tongued, with a kind of half-cynical dryness that gave his not too recondite quips and jokes a certain flavour; but on this occasion he was more than ordinarily facetious. Not only that, but he revealed to us plans for further intellectual display sufficient to make one's blood run cold.

“Yes,” said he cheerfully; “that’s what I do when I’m having a quiet walk along the bank. I’m working hard all the time. I’m storing up observations, reflections, aphorisms, all kinds of things; and I’m going to jot them down; and I’ll read them out to you; and you’re all to give me a frank opinion, and say whether any of them are likely to be of any use.”

“Fancy having aphorisms read to us after dinner!” said one of us, who was rather

aghast at the prospect. "The novel-heroine of former days had no scruple at all in opening her little book, and reading out her 'thoughts'; and the public didn't object; for at that time nearly everybody kept a diary, and was rather proud of turning out neat little bits of wisdom, cut and dried. But a diary—in these times——"

"Oh, that isn't what I mean," he said. "My profound observations on human life and character are all to come in in dialogue."

"But dialogue must arise naturally from the circumstances, or else it will be artificial; or, what is worse, it will be suspected of being so."

"Invent the circumstances to suit," observed this intrepid young man.

"Perhaps," suggested Queen Tita, apparently without guile, "Mr. Duncombe would show us some of these materials, and then we should understand?"

"Of course I will!" said he, frankly. "There's no unnecessary modesty about me. I really invite you to say 'rubbish' if you think they are rubbish. On the other hand, you might give me valuable hints as to how to bring them in—either in a play or in a story. I'm willing to learn."

He laid down his knife and fork ; and took out and opened a small memorandum-book.

"Here, for example, is what appears to me a reasonable suggestion. 'Londoners should be taxed at a higher rate than any other community in the country, because they get so much food for nothing. The living organisms in the water they drink are supplied to them quite recklessly, and free of cost. Why should other cities be less favoured?' Now, don't you call that dialogue arising out of the circumstances? You are walking by the side of the Thames; you think of the destination of the water, and its quality."

"It would be awfully difficult to represent the Thames on the stage," observed Queen Tita, anxious to help the budding Shakespeare. "Even if you had real water, the people would not know it was the Thames."

"But I should put that in a story—in the dialogue, don't you know."

"Yes," said one of us; "and have the public turn round and rend you for making faces at it. Come; let's have another one."

"Very well," said he. "How about this?—'The wisdom of children is wonderful—when they are your own children: other people's children don't seem quite so wise.'"

"Why, you would insult every mother in the country!" exclaimed Queen Tita. "Every one of them would think the remark addressed to her."

"It won't do? Well, out it goes. I'm not proud. The interests of the British public before anything; and I won't offer them articles that haven't been approved and passed," he continued, quite good-naturedly. "How's this, then?—'At Christmas-time Providence must be rather puzzled as to how all those millions of wishes for happiness and prosperity during the coming year are to be met. How can the supply meet the demand?'"

"Mr. Duncombe," she said, but quite gently, "I don't think it will serve your turn with anybody to be profane."

He snapped the book together and took up his knife and fork.

"No," said he, "no one has any luck with criticism except after dinner. Then people are inclined to be complaisant. That was why, when the public dined at midday, the players opened the theatres in the afternoon; when the public took to dining in the afternoon, the theatres were opened in the evening; and now, when the public dine in the

evening, the theatres open at night. I am very much obliged to you for your kind criticism; but the next time I try it will be at a much later hour."

He took his present failure with a light heart; and why? Simply because he had successfully established a scheme by which he could show off at any moment he pleased before these two women-folk. Young men are always recollecting clever things they might have said to girls, and bitterly regretting that their wit was not alert enough when the occasion was there. But here was a young man who could spend all his leisure time in constructing these sparkling and ingenious "might-have-beens"; and who had also invented a crafty device for displaying them. The interests of the British public, indeed! Materials for dramas and plays, forsooth! What he really wanted was to flash those intellectual jewels before the eyes of Peggy Rosslyn, who had taken no notice of him since we had started on this trip. Very well; young people have curious ways; but there was one dispassionate observer on board, who was of opinion that Miss Peggy's eyes would take a good deal of dazzling before her brain became confused; while as for her heart

—but, perhaps, a person certified as being without a character, had no heart at all.

Windsor is hated by bargemen, because of the long interruption of the towing-path, which necessitates a tedious poling performance, and also because of the depth of the stream ; and this hatred is not unreasonable, as we innocents were soon to discover. We sent Coriolanus and his driver along to the Brocas meadows, and then set about getting the boat along too. But not even the long pole we had purchased at Staines was of any use here ; and once more we found ourselves helpless in the middle of the river, unable to reach the bottom with any of our sticks, and driven to a feeble form of paddling, producing but the smallest effect.

“What uz the use of a boat without oars ?” says Murdoch, gloomily, to Mr. Duncombe, when he is quite sure “the mustress” is out of hearing.

“Well, you’re quite right, Murdoch,” the young man answers. “We must buy a pair of oars at Oxford.”

“And what uz the use of a pair of oars if there’s no place to work them ?”

This seems an awkward dilemma.

“We’ll have to invent a place, that’s all.”

However, there happened to be a light wind blowing up stream ; and the Nameless Barge had a sufficiently large surface exposed to it ; so that, what with this favouring breeze, and the vigorous use of poles and sticks, we did get her along to the Brocas, where Coriolanus was again attached, and our gentle and silent progress resumed.

All the four of us were now in the stern together—one perched aloft and steering—as we stole along, on this quiet afternoon by Boveney Lock and Surly Hall and Oakley Court, looking at the placid landscape and listening to the salmon-reel cry of the corn-crake, the kurrooing of the wood-pigeons, and the soft and distant note of the cuckoo. And perhaps it was our being brought together in this way, and cut off from the rest of the world, as it were, that made our sentimental Mrs. Threepenny-bit think of far other scenes.

“It’s very pretty, you know,” she says, glancing along the bank ; “oh, yes, it’s very pretty ; and I could understand people in time becoming very fond of the quietude of it. But, sometimes—well, one can’t help it—you begin to wish you were away in places you have a stronger affection for——” Here she suddenly takes her friend’s hand. “Oh,

Peggy, if only we had you with us now in the Sound of Ulva, or in Loch-na-Keal ! ”

“ But as I can’t be there I’m very glad to be here,” says our practical Peggy. “ Why, I think it most delightful ! And the places are so interesting too. Did the Vicar of Bray really live there ? ”

At Maidenhead we had some excellent exercise before dinner ; for here again the towing-path is interrupted for a considerable distance, and we had to shove our Noah’s Ark along by means of the sticks. The water, however, is of less depth here than at Windsor, so that we had little difficulty in getting her under the bridge and over to the Berkshire side. Then came the rough-and-tumble of Boulter’s Lock ; after which we found ourselves gliding silently along under the hanging woods of Clevedon. The shades of evening were stealing over the landscape now ; but there was a golden touch appearing here and there among the western clouds, and we had vague hopes of a clear sky at night.

By the time we had got through the lock at Cookham and poled across to the riverside inn there, the dusk had fallen, and orange rays of light from the windows of the comfortable-looking hostelry shot through under-

neath the ancient yews. A good-natured boatman guided us to convenient moorings—which seemed to be just outside somebody's garden, for we were embedded among bushes and overarched by tall trees; and then we began to light our lamps and candles, and to draw together the tiny red window-curtains, while Miss Peggy helped to lay the cloth for dinner. Jack Duncombe slung a bottle of wine over the side to cool; Mrs. Threepenny-bit apportioned the napkin rings we were to retain during the voyage; and so forth; and presently Murdoch's welcome appearance summoned us to our seats.

Now, when four people are dining together, nothing is easier than to keep the conversation general; but when you have a young man who is rather anxious to be brilliant, and who nevertheless will constantly address his hostess, evidently expecting the other two to listen, then, perhaps, the other two may be driven in self-defence to talk by themselves. Moreover, when you have two and two talking, courtesy demands that you should not speak loudly, for you might annoy your neighbours. Besides that, Miss Peggy was telling her immediate companion of her experiences of camping-out; that is to say, she had not

been camping-out, but certain of her young gentlemen friends had been, in the Adirondacks, while she and her mamma were staying at the Sagamore Hotel, on Lake George ; and there were certain stories and adventures to relate which might have been misinterpreted by the vulgar mind. Miss Peggy's eyes said more than her words when she was challenged to make confession. And it is to be imagined that the presence of one young lady—of rather attractive appearance, and just a little bit inclined to be mischievous—amongst those idling young men did not tend much to the cultivation of a generous good-fellowship. She herself, of course, gave quite a different reason for the breaking up of the camp. She said the young men were simply crowded out. It appears that they used to have occasional afternoon receptions, to which they invited such neighbours as were within reasonable distance, giving them what little refreshment was procurable. But these festivities proved popular ; neighbours invited neighbours ; all sorts of people came unasked ; and the climax was reached when one tall native of the wilds was overheard to say to another stranger, "Be them nuts free ?" That was Miss Peggy's story of the breaking-up of the camp ; but

there may have been other reasons for those young men forsaking their forest life, and going sadly away back to their homes in Brooklyn and New York. One could only guess; for Miss Peggy's eyes, though they tell a good deal, don't tell everything. As for certain other admissions she made—well, they were in the nature of confidences, and therefore cannot, and shall *not*, be set down here.

In the midst of all this, Queen Tita is heard to exclaim—

“Well, I declare! Look where he has hung that cigar-cutter! That is a pretty kind of thing to wear at one's watch-chain as a charm!”

“Madam,” observes the owner of the article in question, “for once you are right. It is a very pretty kind of thing to wear as a charm. But supposing it were not, what then? Have you lived all these years without discovering this—that it is not the character of the gift but the intention of the giver that is of importance: isn't that so, Miss Peggy?”

“Why, of course it is!” says Miss Peggy, boldly, but with her eyes cast down.

“Oh, indeed,” she says, turning to the girl. “And you? I suppose you will have that

silver pencil-case mounted and made into a brooch?"

Peggy looks up, laughing, but defiant.

"Why not? I think it would do very well, and be such a new idea. Why, the British jeweller's imagination never gets beyond a butterfly or a horse-shoe. You should see Tiffany's. And then the dressmakers are all for making you so square-shouldered now-a-days; an oblong brooch at your neck would suit very well."

Mrs. Tom-tit, cowed, baffled, jumped-upon, outstared, exterminated, can only turn and say to her companion, with a sigh of resignation,

"Did you ever hear such brazen impudence?"

"I am afraid you goaded Miss Rosslyn into it," he says, with a smile which is meant to carry peace-making all round the little board.

Well, we sat late after dinner; for everything was very snug and comfortable; and two and two make excellent companionship. Of course, that arrangement did not always exist; for occasionally Jack Duncombe, with a humility we had never before seen him exhibit, addressed Miss Rosslyn direct; and always she listened to him attentively, and with grave and courteous eyes. We sat so

late that some suggestion that had been made about vingt-et-un was dropped by common consent ; and, instead of card-playing, it was proposed that, before turning in, we should have a look at the world outside. The forward window of the saloon was opened ; and we stepped forth from the yellow glare of the lamps and candles into the strange silence and darkness without.

It seemed silent and dark for no more than a second or so. For the young moon was shining in the pale violet skies ; and we could faintly see the surface of the river ; and if the hush of the night seemed to have fallen over the sleeping land, there was a murmur of water in the distance ; and close by, in the bushes, a sedge-warbler was singing shrill and clear. And even Queen Tita forgot to wish that she was far away in Ulva's Sound.

CHAPTER V.

"Ah! my dear love, why do you sleep thus long,
When meeter were that you should now awake
T' wait the coming of your joyous make,
And hearken to the birds' love-learned song,
The dewy leaves among?
For they of joy and pleasance to you sing,
That all the woods them answer, and their echo ring."

Was it that same unholy fowl—the sedge-warbler—that woke some of us next morning, when as yet the dawn was dim in the eastern heavens? The world looked strange at this early hour. There was a ghostly, half-lurid light on the rippling stream; and the night still lingered in the skies, drawing her robes regretfully around her as she slowly left. And what did this beast of a bird say? Why, as plain as plain could be: "Early, early, early!—time to get up! time to get up!—early, early, rise!—time to get up! time to get up!" We cursed him by all his gods, and went to sleep again.

When, much later on, the two women-folk came into the saloon to breakfast, it appeared that they, too, had suffered; indeed, Miss Peggy, though she looked as fresh as a sweet-briar rose, had an odd expression in her eyes, as though the broken dreams and visions of the night had left some bewilderment in the still blue deeps.

"Did you ever hear such an animal!" Queen Tita exclaims. "And then, I was without my sleep-producer——"

"What is that?" our young dramatist promptly inquires.

"Oh, well, I used to suffer a good deal from sleeplessness, about five or six in the morning; and I found the best thing was to sip a little lemon-juice and soda-water, and lie down again. Indeed, I always have it ready when I'm at home, though I seldom have to use it now. Every night, I see that it is there—the lemon-juice in a tumbler, the bottle of soda-water, and even a corkscrew——"

"Not necessarily for insertion, but as a guarantee of good faith," murmurs the young man.

"And the mere consciousness that it is there," she continues, not heeding his flippancy, "seems to be enough. But I never

expected to be woke up in the middle of the night in a quiet place like this."

"Oh, you shouldn't say anything against the sedge-warbler," Jack Duncombe protests. "Don't you know he is the most conscientious of all the birds? He knows that it is his business to pipe; and he goes on piping, morning or evening, until he is dead beat or until he falls asleep. You just try this now: when he stops at night, you throw a stone into the bush, to awaken him; and off he'll go again, piping away for dear life. It's a fact."

"If I threw a stone into the bush, it wouldn't be with that intention," says Mrs. Tom-tit, savagely; and Miss Peggy laughs.

The country between Cookham and Great Marlow, as many people are aware, is one of the most beautiful stretches on the Thames: on the one hand lush meadows, thick-starred with daisies, dandelions, and buttercups, or blush-tinted with patches of the cuckoo-flower; on the other, upland slopes, hanging with beech and wych-elm. And on this silver-clear morning everything looked cool and fresh and bright; there was a light wind ruffling the surface of the river; and there was a half-veiled sunlight touching the upper

foliage of the woods, and lying with a broader cheerfulness on the daisied fields. And in all this wide landscape, shining in the soft green of the early summer, one could now make out but four figures: two of these were Palinurus and his four-footed charge, close at hand; the other two were a couple of young people, who were a good distance ahead, although one or other of them occasionally stooped to pick a wild flower. Well, who could grudge them this pleasant stroll together? Youth naturally goes with May and flower-starred pastures and the freshness of the morning; it seemed fitting to the time and place that these two should be walking along the bank there, by the side of the smoothly-flowing stream. It is true that there was on board a demon of a woman who professed to find in this harmless companionship a confirmation of her own sinister prophecies.

"Ah," said she, when, at Cookham, Jack Duncombe had made bold to ask our Peggy whether she would care to walk on ahead for a bit, and when Miss Rosslyn had graciously assented and gone ashore for the purpose, "ah, I told you: who is in favour now?"

"Go away," answers the man at the wheel.

"What is the value now of all her flattery,

and her love-gifts, and her secret confidences ? He was just a little bit too indifferent ; and Peggy can't stand that. She'll have it out with him now. She'll teach him his proper place. And where will you be ? ”

“ Go away.”

“ Well, she will be caught herself some day, I suppose. But I don't know. Men make such fools of themselves whenever they come near her—just because of her pretty face and her pretty figure—that she can hardly help laughing at them. Mr. Duncombe has been proof so far—because he never had a chance ; you took care he shouldn't have a chance. But Peggy will give him a chance ; oh, yes, she can always manage that.”

“ Will you get away, and stop chattering about that girl ? Is there no other subject on this luckless earth that you can talk about ? ”

“ I wonder who talks about her most ! I wonder who is always making extraordinary discoveries about her character ! ”

“ How can that be, when you declare she hasn't any ? ”

Apparently this is a dilemma ; but, as usual, she escapes.

“ I don't know that the discoveries are

worth much. No; how could a man understand Peggy? It isn't possible. Either he is in love with her, or he is jealous of somebody else being in love with her; and either way he is blinded, and the girl never gets a fair judgment. Now, a woman sees dispassionately what Peggy really is; and I will tell you this, she isn't in the least like what men imagine her to be."

"Peace, fiend; and listen! Men take her as God made her, with all the fascination naturally born of beauty, and with all the glamour naturally cast by a pair of eyes that are not only pretty but also exceedingly amiable and good-humoured; whereas women—who escape the fascination and miss the glamour—think they know her better because they can subject her to their spiteful dissection. But answer me this, Mrs. Farthing-Mephistopheles: which is the real fire-fly—the insect that flashes through the summer night, dazzling you with its splendour, or the insect that you've stuck a pin through and put on card-board and into a glass-case? Which is the real fire-fly? I tell you that a woman's dissection of a woman is worth just nothing at all. Women weren't meant for women, to begin with; it is but natural they should be blind to a fascination

and a glamour that are sufficiently obvious to other folk. And now, to conclude, dearly-beloved brethren, and to end for ever this fruitless exhortation, it is to be observed that here and there on this unhappy planet there are men who are woman-minded, and who think it is the real fire-fly that they have got fixed on card-board."

"At all events," she says, "it's nicer of you to call Peggy a fire-fly than to call her a White Pestilence; and I'm glad you're not in a rage with her for having gone away and forsaken you. You bear it very well. Your pretence of good-natured approval is very well done. But I know you just hate him at this minute; and I shouldn't wonder if you hinted to him that his returning to London at the end of the week would improve his chances at the Bar."

"His chances at the Bar! His chances of getting a farce produced at the Strand theatre, you mean. However, will you be so kind as to remove yourself from my presence, and go away and tell Murdoch to come to the tiller, for I have to hunt out some Ordnance Survey maps. Who else is likely to take any trouble about them?"

Now the business of tracing out with red

ink, on an Ordnance map, our future route by canals and rivers is not a very engrossing one; and so, as the door of the saloon is fully open on this fresh-scented morning, one easily overhears the following conversation.

Queen Tita is in the stern-sheets with her sewing. Murdoch is on the steering-board, with his foot on the tiller.

“And what do you think of England, Murdoch?”

“Oh, it uz a peautiful country, Mem; chist peautiful, with ahl the fine grazing land. I’m sure it uz that meks the English people so rich that they come up in their yats and take ahl the shootings and forests and the salmon-fishings. I hef not seen a bit of bad land anywhere; and there’s no rocks, or peat-bogs, or hulls——”

“But don’t you miss the hills, Murdoch?” she interposes. “Do you know, I am afraid we have rather disappointed you.”

“Oh, no, Mem; you must not be for saying that, Mem. If I hef any disappointment, it wass for you yourself, Mem, bekass I thought you were coming north in a yat.”

“Well, we have been in some strange places, Murdoch, in the old days.”

“Yes, indeed, Mem.”

"Do you remember going away from Isle Ornsay by moonlight?"

"I did not like that night, Mem. There wass two rings round the moon."

"What a place that was to be caught in by the equinoctials!—do you remember the seventy fathoms of anchor-chain? And do you remember the night we flew through Scalpa Sound, with the red of the port light shining on the foam—why, it was like seething jam!"

"Ay, that wass a bad night, too, Mem."

"Do you remember the long, long time we took to get back from Loch Maddy—how many days was it?—a dead calm almost all the time—nothing but blue hills and blue skies and a sea like glass. Why, in a short time they will be having those wonderful nights when there is no darkness all the night through. Wouldn't the people here be glad to be able to play lawn-tennis till eleven o'clock?"

"Yes, Mem. But I wass thinking now, Mem, of ahl the places we used to feesit in the yat, there wass none you liked so well as Polterriv opposite Iona, and the anchorage in the Sound of Ulva, and Bunessan—ay, and Isle Ornsay, too——"

"Oh, I love them all!—I'm not going to make any comparisons. I wasn't born in your country, Murdoch; but whenever I think of it, and of the people, my heart warms to both it and them; and I would rather spend a week there, yacht or no yacht, than have a year's holiday anywhere else in the world."

This is an extremely elegant and appropriate kind of conversation to be overheard at one of the very prettiest spots on the Thames—these two weeping together by the waters of Babylon, as they remembered Zion. Why, when one steps forth again into the outer world, and looks around, it is to wonder what any human being can wish for more. Over there, on the Berkshire side, and rising steep and sheer from the river's edge, are the Quarry Woods, the young foliage all shimmering in the sunlight; just under them the deep olive-green of the reflections on the water is broken by silver-flashing ripples; and above and beyond certain willowy islands in mid-channel one catches a glimpse of the spire of Marlow church and a bit of red-tiled roof. A more pleasant-looking landscape—in water-colour—one could not desire: why should Madam Ingratitude sigh for the sombre

solitudes of the north, and the magic of moonlight nights at sea?

At Marlow Lock our young people were good enough to come on board again; for we had to get the boat past the little town by means of our sticks; and it must be said for Jack Duncombe that he was always at hand when there was any hard work to be done. As for Miss Peggy, she comes through the saloon, opens the window, and is pleased to join the solitary person at the bow.

"I hope you have enjoyed your morning walk, Miss Peggy."

She looks up quickly—to be on the alert against any possible sarcasm; and then, seeing that no harm is meant, she says—

"He's rather nice, you know."

"Indeed."

"Oh, yes, he's rather nice, if he wouldn't try to be so clever. Indeed, he reminds me of some of our young fellows at home, who rather tire you by their determination to be funny. I hardly expected it in an Englishman. I thought Englishmen were so satisfied with themselves that they wouldn't take the trouble to try to produce any effect on a stranger."

"That depends on the stranger—on her

age and the colour of her eyes, and a lot of things."

"I hope he hasn't been making a fool of me," she says, looking at the little nosegay she holds in her hands. "You see I am very anxious to know what were Shakespeare's wild-flowers; and we've got the names pretty well mixed on our side—I know that what we call the cowslip in Long Island is really the marsh-marigold; then we've got no primroses in America, nor ivy, nor heather, no, nor hawthorn, I believe; and I want to know what the flowers are that your English poets mention——"

"But, look here, Miss Peggy, the poets are most dangerous guides to follow, especially as regards the seasons of the wild-flowers. You will wander about a long time before you find a bank whereon the wild thyme blows, along with oxlips and musk-roses and eglantine. Milton called for a heap of impossibilities to strew on the grave of Lycidas; indeed, it never was Buckinghamshire that Milton looked at—it was a very literary sort of landscape he had around him——"

"I don't mean that," she says, without ceremony; "I want to know what were really the flowers that Perdita had in her lap or her

basket, whichever it was ; and what were the daisies pied and violets blue that Rosalind sings about in the forest scene—— ”

“ By virtue of stage-license only.”

“ This is the real English daisy, then ? ” she says, examining her little nosegay again.

“ Undoubtedly.”

“ And this is the cuckoo-flower ? ”

“ The cuckoo-flower, or lady’s smock, whichever you please.”

“ I think I can trust you better than him—for he would say anything,” continues Miss Peggy. “ And I am going to get you to tell me the names of all the wild flowers as we go along—all that are mentioned in Shakespeare, I mean ; and this is a small mark of gratitude in advance—if you will wear it, and if I can find a pin—and if anyone asks you where you got the nosegay, you must just say it dropped from the clouds.”

By this time we had resumed our silent voyage through the wide-stretching meadows that were all shining in the light of this clear May day. The world seemed very empty somehow. We met no one on the river ; perhaps it was too early in the year for many boating-parties to be abroad. The only interruptions to our placid progress were the

ferries and the locks ; and we were now grown quite proficient in getting the boat across the stream, and rather enjoyed the hard work. As for the locks, the people there were far from being sulky toll-takers ; they seemed rather to welcome the sight of strangers in these solitary parts ; and more than once brought our women-folk a few flowers from their trimly-kept gardens. Miss Peggy, while the boat was being got through, was generally on shore, where she betrayed not the least hesitation in speaking to anyone, man, woman, or child, that chanced to be about.

At what precise spot we stopped for luncheon it would be hard to say ; but it was somewhere between Hurley Mill and Medmenham ; we merely chose the prettiest stretch of meadow we could see—where there were some pollard willows close to the stream—and ran the boat in there and made her fast. We had all the freedom and remoteness and landscape surroundings of a picnic ; but also we had comfortable seats to sit on, and the unmistakable convenience of a table. Jack Duncombe, who had steered all the way from Marlow, on coming into the saloon appeared to be a little surprised that Miss Peggy should have given away the rustic posy he had helped

her to gather ; but it is wholesome for young men to be taught lessons.

It was during this leisurely meal that Mr. Duncombe (who, in the morning, had been telling Miss Peggy something of his pursuits and experiences and hopes) incidentally fell foul of dramatic critics and criticism, and proceeded to entertain us with a furious onslaught on both. Why, if criticism were the contemptible and inefficient thing he declared it to be, he took the trouble to be angry about it we did not wholly understand. He maintained that the function of professional criticism had become obsolete ; that the public had no time to listen to the myriad contradictory voices of newspapers, magazines, and reviews ; that the fortunes of a play or a book were made at the dinner-table, at afternoon tea, in the smoking-room of a club. He half-heartedly admitted that there was something to be said in favour of the trade or profession of criticism as a means of providing food for a certain number of people who, themselves incapable of producing anything, were content to live by passing opinions on the work of others ; but he insisted that it was a mean and parasitical occupation, and the fruits of it absolutely useless to, and disregarded by,

the public. With much more of the like sort. The cruel fate of the luckless little comedy was being sternly avenged. The first-night mercenaries, as he called them, were being torn and rended in royal fashion. And when it was pointed out to him, by one who had but little interest in the subject, and who in any case was at the moment inclined to be generally complaisant (through wearing of a certain nose-gay), when it was pointed out to him that after all critics were, though the fact has been doubted, human beings; that they can bear a grudge; that, in a measure, they hang together ("Wish they did!" said he); and that, therefore, the solitary dramatist who seeks to fight them is a fool, and will suffer for his pains, he would have none of it.

"Oh, don't you suppose that I am one of the wretched creatures who shake and shudder when they hear a critic come crashing through the jungle. Not a bit! I may stand aside for a moment, but I'll have a shot at the beast all the same before he has gone far."

And then again he said (having been interrupted by his hostess asking him to open a bottle of soda-water)—

"If I were writing a book, wouldn't I like

to lay traps for them, to expose their ignorance. I'd have a boat land on the north side of the Thames, in Kent. I'd have a Gloucester yeoman die intestate, and his freeholds go to his youngest son. I'd use all kinds of phrases that they'd gird at as Scotticisms, and then I'd smash them with Chaucer and Shakespeare. Why, I believe Shakespeare did lay traps for the scurrilous idiots who were always attacking him. Giving a seaport to Bohemia was a trap. I've no doubt he knew quite well that at one time Bohemia had seaports on the Adriatic; and I dare say he had his laugh over the ignorant objectors of his own day. But, you see, he can't have it out with the ignorant objectors of our day, because he's dead."

"He is," said Queen Titania, calmly; and this ended the discourse; for we saw through the windows that Palinurus had made his appearance—old Pal, we had now got to call him, affectionately—along with the amplemaned and bushy-tailed white charger that had grown so familiar a feature in these breezy spring landscapes.

As we go on again, by Medmenham, and towards Hambledon Lock, Miss Peggy is up at the bow, and she is talking, in rather a low

voice, and with downcast eyes. There are reasons why she does not wish to be overheard : Jack Duncombe is at the tiller ; and the country around us is absolutely silent, save for the singing of the birds.

“ Do you really think there is anything in him ? ” she asks.

“ Why, his brain is as full of projects as a hive is full of bees.”

“ But do you think he will succeed ? ”

“ He ought to hit on a good thing sooner or later. He is industrious enough.”

“ And a successful play pays very well, does it not ? It is worth trying for.”

“ That is hardly what he is aiming at. His family have plenty of money ; and he is the eldest son. It's honour and glory that he is after—fame as an author—bowing his thanks to a crowded audience on a first night—and having young women write to him for his autograph.”

“ I'm sure I hope he will succeed,” she remarks—and she seems to take a very sincere and good-natured interest in the young man's welfare. “ But isn't it a very precarious profession ? Don't you think he would have a much safer, a more settled, occupation if he kept to the law ? ”

"A more settled occupation, certainly: he could sit in his rooms in the Temple, and read novels. There would be no anxiety about the dramatic critics then."

"But surely you will remonstrate with him about that," she says, with apparently honest concern. "Why, it is such a pity for a young man to make enemies, and at the very beginning of his career."

"He does not mean half what he says. He talks for the sake of talking—especially if there is a young lady listening. By-the-way, what has become of the aphorisms? We've had none of late."

"He says they did not meet with a flattering reception," answers Miss Peggy, who appears to have received a good many of Mr. Duncombe's confidences during the morning. "But I can tell you that he is still storing them up, and all kinds of suggestions, too, for plays and novels and sketches. He showed me his book. Oh, I thought it was very interesting to hear him talk about all the various things he meant to do; and some of them were very clever, and some very amusing. It was like being in a workshop, and looking at the materials; you couldn't help being interested. There was one suggestion for a

short story or a sketch that seemed to me very funny: would it be breaking confidence if I told it to you?"

"You may depend on it I shall not rob the boy of his ideas."

"Well, it is the sub-editor of a provincial paper, and his room is on the ground-floor. It is a hot day, and the door is open. He has been writing an essay on presence of mind; but he has left that on his desk, and gone to a little table by the window, where lunch has been brought in for him. Well, he is at his lunch, when he hears a murmuring noise outside, and then one or two startled cries of warning nearer at hand; and he gets up to look over the under-sash into the street. At the same moment a leopard comes slouching in by the open door, and, without seeing him, sneaks away into the opposite corner of the room. Then he understands what the murmur of the crowd outside means; he remembers that a menagerie was to arrive in the town that day, and this leopard has escaped. Then begins a description of his feelings. He daren't stir, for the slightest movement would attract the attention of the beast. And perhaps it will smell the chop on the table, and come round that way to him. The question

is whether he should make one spring for the door, or wait for the menagerie people to come to his help. But he can't think—he can't decide anything—because he is in such a horrible fright: and his essay on presence of mind has gone entirely out of his head. Don't you see?"

"Yes; but what happens?"

"Oh, that's all."

"Oh, that's all? But what did the man do?"

"I don't know."

"Ah, now I see. The interest is psychological. Given the environment—that is to say, the four walls of a sub-editor's room, including a leopard, a man, and a fragrant chop; to find out what the man—his temperament subject to the laws and conditions of heredity—will probably be thinking about. That's it, is it? Well, it might be interesting; but, if Mr. Duncombe speaks to you of his projected story again, you may hint to him that the public, being gross and carnal-minded, would very likely want to know what the man did, and what the leopard did, too."

"I will," she says; and then she raises her eyes a little. "Are you aware that those two down there are talking; and I can see that

they are talking about us ; and I know that they are saying we are engaged in the study of English history. Now, are we ? ”

“ Certainly not ; we don’t do such things.”

“ Well, I’m off. I don’t like being subjected to suspicion. Good-bye.”

“ Good-bye.”

So Miss Peggy descends into the saloon ; but she considerably leaves the window open behind her ; and presently one hears a strumming on the banjo, and discovers that she is briskly busy with “ Oh, dem golden slippers,” “ In the morning,” and other alien airs.

When at length we reached Henley we stopped to bait the horse there, and we all went ashore ; and, of course, for the sake of old associations, made our way to the Red Lion, the front of which was one magnificent mass of wistaria in full blossom, a sight worth coming all the way to see. It was while we were having tea in the well-known parlour overlooking the river, that Jack Duncombe made these observations :—

“ We shall get to Sonning to-night ; and I have been thinking that if Miss Rosslyn would like to see a capital specimen of an old-fashioned country inn, we might dine at the Bull there. Not the White Hart down by

the river-side, that is beloved of cockneys ; but the Bull that the artists who know the Thames swear by. It won't be exactly like dining at the Bristol ; but it will be a good deal more picturesque. What do you say, Miss Rosslyn ? ”

Miss Rosslyn, who had taken off her sailor hat (thereby graciously revealing to us all the beautiful masses of her golden-brown hair) and was twirling the same on her fore-finger, made answer very prettily—“ I am sure whatever you all think best will be best. Everything has been delightfully arranged so far—it is like a fairy dream to me. So don't ask me to give any opinion, please ; it will be much better to leave it in your hands.”

“ We'll say the Bull, then,” said he, just as if he were manager of the whole caravan.

And perhaps it was because of his familiarity with these parts that when we went out for a stroll through the pretty, clean-looking, red-and-white town, the young man naturally constituted himself Miss Rosslyn's companion and guide to all there was to be seen. And perhaps it was gratitude on her part that led her, when we returned to the boat, to take up her position in the stern-sheets, along with the other two, leaving the solitary watchman

at the bow to his own meditations. But revenge was nigh. As we were passing Wargrave Marsh, one could hear a lot of chattering astern.

"If they're not snowdrops, what are they?"

"They can't be snowdrops, at this time of the year."

"They're too big for snowdrops."

"Mightn't snowdrops grow large in that swampy place?"

"Let's stop and see, anyway. Old Pal could get hold of some and throw them on board."

Then these innocents must needs stop the boat, and get the astonished driver to adventure his life through that dismal swamp, to reach certain white flowers growing among the rank vegetation near the water's edge. But even when these were got on board, and our progress resumed, the amateur botanists did not seem any the happier. The babblement continued. Then, after a pause—

"Peggy, you go and ask him."

Someone comes along, and through the saloon, and appears at the open window.

"They want you to tell them what kind of a snowdrop this is."

"Go away, and don't talk to me. I don't know you."

"Please!"

"Well, you are a lot of pretty dears! That is your notion of a snowdrop, is it? I suppose none of you are aware that the *Leucojum æstivum* is one of the chief botanical glories and treasures of the Thames?"

"But I can't remember that dreadful name," says Miss Peggy, with the blue eyes grown piteous. "Please, what else do they call it?"

"The snowflake."

"It isn't in Shakespeare?"

"No, it doesn't grow in Warwickshire."

"The snowflake," she says, taking the flowers into her hand again. "When I have told them what it is, I am coming back, if I may. May I?"

"You may."

As we follow the meanderings of the river between Shiplake Lock and Sonning, a grey mist begins to steal over the woods and wide meadows, and seems to presage the long-prayed-for rain. When we arrive at our destination, and walk up through the little village to the Bull Inn, there is just enough light to give our young American friend some vague idea of what the place is like—the

quaint old-fashioned building of brick and timber, with its red-tiled roof, its peaked windows and small-paned casements, the creepers trained up the wall, the large orchard on one side of the house, the row of tall limes in front. Inside, there is another tale to tell; for when we have made our way along the uneven flooring of the corridors, and stumbled headlong into the apartment where we are to dine, we find that lit up by a cheerful blaze of lamps, and everything looking very snug and comfortable indeed. It appears that it is Jack Duncombe who is running this circus, if the phrase may be allowed. We are his guests, he gives us to understand. And, of course, in his character of host he is bound to consult the wishes of the party—of the two women, that is to say; and very indefatigable and considerate he is about it. They even remonstrate. One of them is accustomed to yachting fare; the other has had experiences of camping-out. They beg of him not to be so exacting.

“But I want to show Miss Rosslyn what an English inn is like,” he says; and that is supposed to settle the question: to please Miss Rosslyn everything must yield.

It is gratifying to be able to state that

during the whole of this evening the conduct of Miss Rosslyn was quite beyond reproach. Young Duncombe was in rather an eager and talkative mood—perhaps from the consciousness that he was entertaining those people; and she paid him the most scrupulous and courteous attention. Whether he was in jest or in earnest, she listened; and he had adopted a kind of don't-you-think-so attitude towards her; and often her eyes smiled assent and approval even when she did not speak. One could see that Queen Tita occasionally threw a glance towards the girl that seemed to savour of sarcasm; but women are like that; and are not to be heeded. Miss Peggy was urbanity itself; and no doubt the young man was pleased to have secured so respectful a listener. Not only that, but she managed to pay him a little compliment in so dexterous a manner that the trivial incident is worth recording. He was putting forth the proposition, more or less seriously, that as we raise statues to those of our fellow-creatures who command our admiration and gratitude, so we ought to have a perpetual pillory for those who deserve the universal execration of mankind. His first notion was to have a Chamber of Horrors in Westminster Abbey; but he

concluded that something more cosmopolitan was wanted. And then, when we all began to back our candidates for admission to this Universal Pillory—Bloody Mary—Judge Jeffreys—Torquemada—Alva—Butcher Cumberland—and so on, it came to Miss Peggy's turn to make a suggestion.

"The critic who reviewed Keats's poems in the *Quarterly*," she said.

The allusion was so unmistakable to the complaint he had made that morning that he could hardly help being grateful to her for her proffered sympathy and alliance, even if he refused to regard himself as a distinguished poet, or to rank his ill-starred comedy with "Endymion." It was cleverly done on the part of Miss Peggy. It showed goodwill. Indeed, her eyes showed that too, as she listened to the young man's discourse.

Now, when we left this snug hostelry to return to our Nameless Barge, the two women led the way; and they had their arms interlinked; and were engaged in conversation. What that conversation was we were not permitted to hear; but on reaching the boat—which was all lit up, by-the-way, and in the darkness looked something like one of those illumined toy-churches, with coloured win-

dows, that Italians used to sell in the streets—it was found that Miss Peggy was pretending to be very much annoyed with her friend. She wore an injured air. She would not speak. When Murdoch had got out the gangboard, and we were all in the saloon again, Mrs. Threepenny-bit went and took down the banjo.

“Come, now, Peggy, don’t be vexed—or rather, don’t pretend to be vexed. When I talk to you, it’s for your good. And I tell you the truth. I’m not like those other people. Come along, now, and we’ll have ‘Carry me back to Tennessee,’ as a kind of general good-night.”

Miss Peggy glances at Jack Duncombe, and gently declines. The fact is this: at certain high jinks which the young lady has honoured with her presence, this song, as played by her on the banjo, has been in great request; partly because, no one knowing the words, it could be prolonged indefinitely by singing to it verses of other songs, or even a leading article cut up into the requisite quantities, but mainly because it has an excellent chorus in which everybody can easily join. These festivities, however, were of a strictly esoteric character. The presence of a single stranger invariably put a check on certain of Miss

Peggy's banjo performances; and especially upon "Carry me back to Tennessee." And now the fact that Mr. Duncombe had never been within the charmed circle is enough. It is in vain that cigars are lit, and soda-water (and other things) produced, so that we may have a final and friendly half-hour together: Miss Peggy remains obdurate.

"Oh, no," she says, "I'm afraid Mr. Duncombe would think it stupid—for no one knows the words."

"Why, that's all the fun of it! We'll take Dr. Watts's hymns this time. The words are nothing; the chorus is the objective point."

Miss Peggy reaches over and takes the instrument that is handed to her.

"No," she says, "but I'll try an English ballad I heard a little while ago—I don't know whether I can manage it with this thing."

She struck the strings, and almost directly we recognised the prelude of one of the quaintest and prettiest of the old ballad airs. And then Miss Peggy sang—

Early one morning, just as the sun was rising

I heard a maid sing in the valley below;

"Oh, don't deceive me! Oh, never leave me!

How could you use a poor maiden so?"

And therewithal she looked across the table to Queen Tita—with eyes that spoke of injury and reproach, as clearly as the mischief in them would allow.

CHAPTER VI.

"Ah, I remember well—and how can I
But evermore remember well—when first
Our flame began, when scarce we knew what was
The flame we felt; when as we sat and sighed,
And looked upon each other, and conceived
Not what we ailed, yet something we did ail,
And yet were well, and yet we were not well,
And what was our disease we could not tell.
Then would we kiss, then sigh, then look: and thus
In that first garden of our simpleness
We spent our childhood. But when years began
To reap the fruit of knowledge, ah, how then
Would she with sterner looks, with graver brow
Check my presumption and my forwardness!
Yet still would give me flowers, still would show
What she would have me, yet not have me, know."

ALL this world of young summer foliage was
thirsting for rain; you could have imagined
that the pendulous leaves of the lime-trees,
hardly moving in the light airs of the morn-
ing, were whispering among themselves, and
listening for the first soft patterings of the

longed-for shower. They were likely to get it, too. The swifts and swallows were flying low over the river; the sky was a uniform pale white, without any definite trace of cloud; there was a feeling of moisture in the faint-stirring wind. It was when we were passing Holme Park that it began—a few touches on hand or cheek, almost imperceptible, then heavier drops striking on the glassy surface of the stream, each with its little bell of air, and widening circle around it. There was an immediate call for waterproofs. Mrs. Threepenny-bit, when she was encased in hers, with the big hood over her head, looked amazingly like one of the mountain dwarfs in "Rip van Winkle"; Miss Peggy, on the other hand, wore a grey driving-coat that suited very well her tall and elegant figure, and also she had a grey Tam o' Shanter, which she declared was impervious to the wet. The four of us were now together in the stern—Murdoch being engaged in the pantry; and it has before been observed by certain people who have large experience of weather that rain is a great promoter of good-comradeship, fellow-sufferers appearing to combine, for the very purpose of defying the elements, and cheating themselves into the belief that they

are enjoying themselves very much indeed. The illusion is more likely to be maintained when the waterproofs are sound.

On this occasion Jack Duncombe was entertaining us with a lively account of certain gaieties and festivities that had taken place just before he left town, and also with notes and anticipations of the season then entering on its full swing. All this talk—into which well-known names were freely introduced—was naturally very interesting to our young American visitor; and she listened with a perfect attention. Of course he was far better qualified than simply country folk like ourselves to inform her ingenuous mind upon such matters; and she paid him every heed; and seemed to regard him with favour. Perhaps, to one or other of us, this echo of the great roar of the London season may have sounded strangely in these still solitudes, with nothing around us but whispering rain and shimmering water and the constantly-moving landscape; but Miss Peggy was a young woman with a healthy and natural interest in every kind of social affair; and she was pleased to hear all this about balls, and drawing-rooms, and pastoral plays, and private views, and famous beauties and their cos-

tumes. He had his reward, too. Addressing her almost exclusively, he was privileged to look at her as much as he chose; and it has been remarked before in these pages, once or twice, that Miss Peggy's eyes were distinctly good-natured. Moreover, he talked more freely to her now; and was gradually resuming—of course, within respectful limits—his usual audacity of manner.

Incidentally, he mentioned the banjo craze, and made merry over the number of people, among his own acquaintance, who, with a light heart, had set about learning to play, and who had suddenly been brought up short, through want of ear or some other cause.

"I had a try myself," he said modestly; "but I soon got to the end of my tether."

"But you play a little?" she said.

"Oh! yes; a little—in a mechanical sort of way. It isn't everybody has the extraordinary lightness of touch that you have."

"I am not a player at all," she said, "I am only a strummer. Anyhow, my banjo wants a thorough tuning some time or other, and I should be so much obliged to you if you would help me—if you would screw up the pegs while I tune the strings; it is much easier so."

"I think my knowledge of the instrument will go as far as that," said he gravely.

"You know I meant no such thing," she said, laughing; and then she continued, with a fine air of carelessness: "What do you say to having it done now? If you will bring the banjo——"

"Not into the rain," he protested; for a much less ready-witted young man than he could not have failed to perceive the chance before him. "No; we will go into the saloon, and have a thorough overhauling of the strings. It will be a capital way of passing the time, for I don't see much prospect of the weather clearing at present."

She was quite obedient. She rose, and shook the rain-drops from her sleeves and skirts, and passed through the door that he had courteously opened for her, he immediately following. When they had thus disappeared, Queen Tita was left alone with the steersman.

"That young man had better take care," she remarked significantly.

"Why, what have you to say against her now? Did you ever see anyone behave better—more simply and frankly and straightforwardly?"

"If you only knew, it is when Peggy is best behaved that she is most dangerous," was the dark answer. "She doesn't take all that trouble for nothing, you may be sure. Well behaved? Oh! yes; she is well behaved—she is a great deal too well behaved. The guileless eyes, and her courtesy, and her charming manner. Why, last night she listened to him with as much reverence as if he were Mr. Spencer!"

"I suppose that was what you and she were quarrelling about, then?"

"We weren't quarrelling; but I asked her not to pretend to be too much of a simple innocent. I knew what she was after. Tennessee?—oh, dear no! No Tennessee before Mr. Duncombe. Properly-conducted young ladies don't sing Dr. Watts's hymns with a chorus of 'Carry me back to Tennessee.'"

"And that is the way a woman talks about her friend!"

"It isn't altogether her fault either. What I complain of is this—when you had all kinds of objections to Peggy's coming with us, I said that I was willing to take her as my own particular companion. If you were dissatisfied with her, I said she was good enough for me; and that was the arrangement. But what is

the state of affairs now? Why, you two men monopolise her the whole day long. If it isn't the one of you, it's the other; and, of course, it doesn't matter to Peggy which of you it is, or whether it is either of you, so long as it is somebody she can carry on with. When there are no men about she is nice as nice can be."

"The fact is simply that you want her all to yourself, and are outrageously jealous of the smallest bit of attention she pays to anyone else; and you accuse her of 'carrying on' when she is merely decently civil to anyone who is talking to her."

"Decently civil! Too civil by half!"

"And you think she doesn't see through you, and know how to humour you? Why, it's a high comedy to watch her taking you in hand, whenever she thinks it necessary, and stroking and petting you into a good temper, just as if you were a baby; only you are a good deal more amenable than a baby when it is Peggy that pets you."

"I repeat, that when there are no men about she is just as nice as nice can be. She is an honest, frank, good girl, and very kind and affectionate; but directly men come along she gets mischief into her head, for it amuses

her to see them make fools of themselves. And if they could only look at themselves in a mirror ! ”

“ I thought that was the occupation of a woman. Who was it who said that the only furniture a woman wanted in a room was ten mirrors and a powder-puff ? ”

“ Nobody ever said anything so ridiculous. You are always inventing spiteful things about women, and putting them down to some imaginary French philosopher. You think I don't know better ! ”

“ You know everything ; and so, perhaps, you can tell me how long it takes to tune up a banjo ? ”

They certainly were an unconscionable time about it. The rain had almost ceased now ; different lights were appearing in the sky—warm greys that had a cheerful look about them ; and the birds had resumed their singing, filling all the air with a harmonious music. We crossed the mouth of the river Kennet, thus beginning the long loop which we hoped to complete by means of the Thames, Severn, Avon, and Kennet, with the intermediate canals, until we should return to this very spot. As we went by Reading, however, our hopes for fine weather were for the

moment dashed; a "smurr" came over, and the thin veil of the shower toned down the colours of the red houses, the meadows golden with buttercups, the bronze foliage of the poplars, the various greens of willow and elm and chestnut, and the shadowy blue of the distant and low-lying hills. Perhaps it ought to be explained that, standing on the gunwale of a house-boat enables one to see an immeasurably wider stretch of landscape than when one is rowing; and the board that we had placed across for the convenience of the steersman could always accommodate two or three people standing side by side. And so (while that banjo seemed to take a lot of tuning) we went on through the phantasmal atmosphere, watching the few signs of life that were visible in the still world around us. A large heron rose suddenly, his long legs dangling beneath him; but soon he had these securely tucked up, and was sailing away on his heavy-flapping wings. A peewit, with startled cry and erratic flight, jerked himself into the higher air. A moor-hen, disturbed by the tow-rope, went whirring across the river; and we could see in the rushes the nest she had left, with her brood of young ones in it. As for excitement and occupa-

tion on this rather idle day, these were always afforded us by the considerate carelessness of the Thames Conservators, for the towing-line was continually catching up on some broken stump or unyielding willow, and only a wild yell to Palinurus saved us, on these occasions, from being dragged bodily on to the bank.

Nearing Purley, the tow-path twice crosses the river; and now Jack Duncombe appears at the bow, and gets hold of the long pole, while Miss Rosslyn comes along and joins her friends aft.

"I had no idea it had left off raining," she observes innocently.

"I hope you got the banjo properly tuned," one of us says to her.

"Oh, yes; it is much better now," she answers pleasantly and with an artless air. "But Mr. Duncombe was too modest. He can play very fairly indeed. He played two or three things just to try the banjo, and I was quite surprised."

"Oh, you can give him some lessons, Peggy," her friend says; but the young lady won't look her way; and the sarcasm—if any was intended—is lost.

Now, it was at our second crossing—to the Berkshire side—that a small incident occurred

of which we did not get the explanation till nightfall. Having to wait a little while for the horse coming over on the ferry-boat, we landed and loitered about under some magnificently tall black poplars near to the river's side. Miss Peggy was talking, in the most casual way, about nothing in particular, to the veracious chronicler of these events, when something happened, or was perceived, that seemed to afford Queen Tita much covert amusement. The twopenny-halfpenny secret, whatever it was, was imparted to Jack Duncombe, as we could see.

"What is she laughing at?" says Miss Peggy.

"Goodness only knows. The diversions of Purley, perhaps. I don't see much reason for gaiety about the place, or about the weather either."

"If you want to find out, do you know how?" says Miss Peggy, with an engaging smile. "All you have to do is to refrain from asking. If you ask them, they will make a mystery of it. If you don't ask, you may be certain they will speak about it—they couldn't keep their enjoyment to themselves."

There seemed to be a modicum of wisdom in these observations of this innocent-eyed

young thing; and so not a word was said as we got on board and resumed our peaceful progress through this still and silvery-grey day. The rain had stopped; the birds had begun again; and steadily the prow of the Nameless Barge kept cutting in twain the lakelike reflections on the smooth surface of the river.

We stopped for luncheon a little above Whitchurch Lock, and moored so close in among the willows that one or two branches appeared at the open window of the saloon, making rather a pretty decoration there. Then we went on and past the beechwoods of Basildon. Everywhere there was a grey mist after the rain; but all the same there was a faint light on the tops of the trees that seemed to suggest the possibility of the sun breaking through those pallid skies.

It was here that Mrs. Threepenny-bit's jealousy declared itself. She seemed to think (and perhaps not unnaturally) that these two young people had had quite enough of each other's society; and may have thought it was hardly fair she should be so entirely deprived of her own chosen companion. So she comes along to the stern-sheets, where Miss Peggy and Jack Duncombe are talking together,

overlooked but unheeded by the steersman, who, indeed, has enough to do with the recurrent obstructions on the bank.

"Peggy," she says, "would you like to do a human being a great kindness?"

"Why, yes," the young lady answers instantly. "What is it? Who is it?"

"It's Murdoch, poor fellow. He wouldn't utter a word of complaint or disappointment, you know—not for worlds; but I do believe he would rather be a deck hand on board the *Dunara Castle* than get double wages on board a thing like this. Now, come along, Peggy, and we'll cheer him up a bit. We'll pretend to be on board a yacht."

Miss Peggy jumps to her feet with alacrity; she may have many evil qualities, but a want of good-nature is not amongst them.

"But how?" she says, putting her hand on her friend's shoulder.

"I'll show you," is the answer; and the women disappear together.

"Now," says the steersman of this unjustly-despised vessel to his sole remaining companion, "do you want a word of friendly advice?"

"Certainly."

"Very well. Listen and take heed. This

night at dinner, whenever you see anything that looks particularly deadly — magenta-coloured jellies, dark devices in the way of lobster, mushroom patties, olives stuffed with bacon—I say, whenever you see anything that looks absolutely fatal, you must seize on it and eat it boldly—never mind the consequences—and as boldly must you praise it. Now remember. You have been warned. Never mind what happens to you. You’ve got to do it.”

“Well,” says he, looking rather bewildered, “I suppose a man can’t die better than by facing fearful odds—though doing that in a game of billiards is more in my line. But really, if I am to rush upon death in this way, I should like to know what for?”

“What for? Haven’t you got eyes and ears? Didn’t you see these two women go away? Didn’t you hear them say they were going to pretend to be on board a yacht? And don’t you know what is happening at this moment? They have got the table in the saloon covered over with cloths; and Murdoch is taking them flour, and butter, and jam, and lobster, and grated cheese, and nutmeg, and caviare, and olives, and I don’t know what; and soon they’ll be engaged in

turning out kromeskis, and rissoles, and croquettes, and every kind of poisonous invention of the devil. What's more, now they've begun, they'll go on. How long do you expect to survive?"

"I don't know," said he. "I can stand a good deal. Some constitutions are pretty wiry. They say there was a sepoy at the end of the Indian Mutiny who was to be blown from a gun; and he was so tough that, when the cannon was fired, his body merely stretched out and let the ball go by, and when they came to untie him, he collapsed again, and was quite well; and they were so disgusted they could do nothing but give him a kick and send him off."

"The story is a little improbable, but, no doubt, true. However, that sepoy had never sailed in a boat with two amateur cooks on board."

"I think I can score here," the young man said, thoughtfully; but he would not explain further, and one could only guess that he was contemplating a mean and cowardly breach of confidence.

Indeed, we were well rid of those women; for we found the towing-path at this part of the river—especially after we crossed at

Moulsford Ferry—to be in a most disgraceful state of neglect, and we were continually getting into trouble with broken fences, posts, and willow-stumps. It must be admitted, however, that we were ourselves partly responsible for these calamities. For one thing, our towing-line should have been attached to the top of the “house,” instead of to the bow of the boat (most of the canal barges have a mast or pole for the purpose), and the increased height thus gained would have enabled us to clear at least some of the obstructions. For another, Palinurus had a habit of keeping his gaze fixed on the far future; he seemed to consider that, so long as he could urge Coriolanus onward, he had no concern with anything that was happening behind. The worst of it was that a single hitch generally begat several hitches; for when once one of the broken posts or impenitent bushes had caused the Nameless Barge to “run her nozzle agin the bank,” there was a difficulty in getting proper steering-way on her, and a consequent risk of further entanglements. However, we encountered these delays with patience, and crept on by Little Stoke, and Cholsey, and towards Winterbrook; while the tinkling

notes of "I'll meet her when the sun goes down" told us one of two things—either that the labours of the amateur cooks were ended, or that those two people had stolen away on false pretences, to have a confabulation together.

"Do you know, that is a very interesting girl," says Jack Duncombe, reflectively, as he listens to the banjo.

"Indeed?"

"Oh, very," he repeats with decision.

"I don't know much about her myself. I have been told by a friend of hers that she is as characterless as a woman in a fashion-plate."

"Well, you see," observes this profound student of mankind, "all Americans are interesting in a way. You never know what strain of blood may reveal itself; and probably the American himself couldn't tell you; so there is always a possibility of surprise. He may be descended from one of Captain John Smith's 'broken men'—the adventurers and desperadoes who went to the South; or he may have the sour Puritanical leaven in him, and, in spite of his nineteenth-century manner and clothes, be at heart an intolerant bigot and persecutor, if he had the chance.

Or he may have French blood in his veins, or Spanish, or even a drop of Red Indian. You never know how it may develop itself."

"Your interest in Miss Peggy, then, is purely ethnological?" one asks of him, merely for the sake of information.

"Oh, well," he says, after a quick glance of suspicion, "she is a very nice girl besides that. I was talking of Americans in general."

"And from what kind of stock do you suppose Miss Peggy is descended?"

"Of course I can't tell; but I know she was very much pleased when I told her that the Rosslyn family here spell their name just as her family do. She only knew it in connection with Roslin Abbey; and thought it had got corrupted in America. She says she doesn't know where her people originally came from."

"From the Garden of Eden, I suppose."

"I can imagine her delight if you could show her that her family were settled in some part of this country even three hundred years ago. And as for the Conquest——"

"But the name is a little older than that, my young friend. *Ross* and *lyn* are two British words—the meadow of the pool or waterfall they mean, if that is any news to you."

"It is extraordinary the interest she takes in anything that's old," continues this young man, who seems to have been using his opportunities of studying Miss Peggy's character, or no-character, with some diligence. "Old furniture, old jewellery, old buildings, anything that has been handed down from former times. And she is so anxious to know how people lived then; and whether their present descendants are like them in any way; and whether the representatives of the great families of England are different from the ordinary people one meets. You should hear her talk about the Tower, and Westminster Abbey. I think it was the historical characters in Shakespeare that captivated her imagination, to begin with; I fancy that has had a good deal to do with it."

"So you have been engaged in teaching her English history?"

"No," says this impertinent boy; "I leave that to my elders and betters." And there is a flash of delight in his grey eyes at getting this easy chance. Of course there is no reply. Babies in sarcasm should be encouraged rather than crushed.

We moored at Wallingford that night; and by the time that dinner was ready it was dark

enough to have the lamps and candles lit. And perhaps, as we sate in this little room—and observed our young Dramatist's feeble efforts to guess at what dishes were the handiwork of the amateur cooks—the place looked all the more snug that the pattering of the rain on the roof was continuously audible. It seemed a familiar sound, somehow. We had heard it, in similar circumstances, in very far out-of-the-way places indeed. How could we tell—seated in this little cabin—with the blinds drawn and the doors shut—but that outside were the mist-hung cliffs of Bourg, and the dark solitudes of Loch-na-Keal? Perhaps, if one were to step forth into that dismal world of rain one might peer through it for the red ray of Rona lighthouse? Or, perhaps, there might be heard the muffled thunder of the western seas surging into the caves of Staffa, or the distant murmur of the tides where Corvrechtan seethes and whirls along the Scarba rocks? We knew nothing of Wallingford; Wallingford was but a name to us. Here was a cabin, comfortably lit and snug, and here was a small group of friends sufficiently well interested in each other; and these immediate surroundings were independent of such external things as we could not

see. But if Queen Tita had imagined that at that moment she could have caught a glimpse of the piercing white light of Lismore, be sure she would not have been sitting there. In one swift second she would have been out and on deck, despite the heaviest rain that ever poured.

“Sufficiently well interested in each other”—the phrase seems inadequate to the occasion. For had we not with us a person whose ethnological antecedents might spring a surprise on us at any moment? One began to wonder how the strain of blood would manifest itself. Would she unexpectedly leap upon us and endeavour to scalp one or other of us with a fruit-knife? Would she incoherently clamour for another Bartholomew Massacre? Or begin to sing psalms through her nose? These and other possibilities—young Shakespeare had said they were possibilities—were somewhat bewildering; but, as a matter of fact, at this instant, the Ethnological Curiosity was calmly carving a slice of pine-apple; and her eyes were cast down; and she was listening to Jack Duncombe; and the smile that hung about her rosebud mouth seemed to say that she was being amiably entertained by her companion. For the rest, she wore on this evening certain swathes of pale pink and pale

yellow muslin that came round her neck, and were fastened at her waist; and anything more cool and summer-like could not well be imagined.

Dinner over, the two women-folk retired to the upper end of the saloon, next to the big window; and Mrs. Threepenny-bit took down the banjo, and, without a word, handed it to Miss Peggy.

"Ah, I know what will fetch you," the girl said, with a not unkindly smile.

She struck a few low notes of introduction, and then began—"Once in the dear dead days beyond recall." It was an air that suited her contralto voice admirably; and when she came to the refrain—"Just a song at twilight, when the lights are low,"—she sang that with a very pretty pathos indeed; insomuch that, when she had ended, Queen Tita did not thank her with any speech, but she put her hand within the girl's arm instead, and let it remain there. With her disengaged arm Miss Peggy held out the banjo.

"You now," she said to Mr. Duncombe, in her frank way.

He took the banjo from her, of course.

"Oh, I can't sing," he said; "but I'll try to give you some idea of a rather quaint little

ballad that most people know of; though very few have heard the whole of it, I imagine. Of course you have seen the play of 'The Green Bushes'?"

Miss Peggy had not.

"Oh, well, it is an old-fashioned melodrama that used to be very popular—perhaps it is now, when it is revived. I won't describe it to you; but there is one part of it in which a young girl goes away in search of her foster-sister, whom she has lost; and she wanders through all the towns and villages in Ireland singing a song that both of them knew, until the foster-sister hears her, and rushes to the window. I think it is a very affecting bit, myself. I'm not ashamed to say that it has made me cry like a baby, though Miami, the real heroine of the piece, doesn't seem to impress me much. Well, now, this is the song the girl sings. The fact is, I——"

He hesitated for a second.

"——I once knew a young actress who used to play the part, and I asked her to give me the words; and she wrote them down for me as far as she knew them."

Possibly one or other of us may have been guessing that perhaps there existed another reason for his interest in things theatrical

besides his thirst for fame; but he had already begun to strum out, in a more or less effective fashion, some such air as this :—



And then he sang, with good expression, if with no great voice—

It's I was a-walking one morning in May
To hear the birds singing and see lambkins play,
I espied a young damsel, so sweetly sung she,
Down by the Green Bushes where she chanced to meet me.

“Remember,” said he, “the words were written down from memory, and I may have got them all wrong.”

Then he went on—

“Oh, why are you loitering here, pretty maid?”
“I'm waiting for my true love,” softly she said;
“Shall I be your true love, and will you agree
To leave the Green Bushes and follow with me?”

I'll buy you fine beavers and fine silken gowns,
I'll give you smart petticoats flounced to the ground,
I'll buy you fine jewels, and live but for thee,
If you'll leave your own true love and follow with me."

"The flounced petticoats make me think
the ballad must be old," said the troubadour;
and he continued:—

"Oh, I want not your beavers, nor your silks, nor your
hose,
For I'm not so poor as to marry for clothes;
But if you'll prove constant and true unto me,
Why, I'll leave the Green Bushes and follow with
thee.

Come, let us be going, kind sir, if you please,
Oh, let us be going from under these trees,
For yonder is coming my true love I see,
Down by the Green Bushes where he was to meet me."

And it's when he came there and found she was gone,
He was nigh heart-broken, and cried out forlorn—
"She has gone with another and forsaken me,
And left the Green Bushes where she used to meet
me!"

"Well, now, I call that just delightful!"
Miss Peggy exclaimed at once. "Why, I
haven't heard anything so quaint and pretty
for many a day! Just delightful, I call it.
Mr. Duncombe, it is always a shame to steal
people's songs, and especially this one, that is
in a kind of way your own property; but really
I should like to take it back home with me.

Would you mind singing it over to me some other time—I think I could remember it.”

“But I will copy it out for you!” he said instantly.

“It would be too much trouble,” she rather faint-heartedly suggested.

“It would give me a great deal of pleasure to copy it out for you,” said he, quite earnestly; and then she thanked him, with her eyes cast down.

We had some further playing and singing (but no “Tennessee”; oh, no; she was too well behaved; the time was not yet) and by-and-by the hour arrived for our retiring to our several bunks. All this afternoon and evening Mrs. Threepenny-bit—our Mrs. Threepenny-bit she ought to be called, as she is a partner in the firm, and, indeed, gives herself as many airs as if she were the whole firm in her own proper person—had had no opportunity of revealing the cause of her sinister laughter at Purley; and indeed the person to whom Miss Peggy had confided her prediction had forgotten all about the matter. Just before our final separating for the night, however, that opportunity chanced to occur; and then Miss Peggy’s prophecies came true.

“I suppose you didn’t notice what happened at Purley?” she says.

"I saw you grinning like a fiend, that was all."

"Of course, you weren't aware that when Peggy and you were standing under those big poplars, there was a bunch of mistletoe right over your heads."

"I was not aware of it; but if I had been, what difference would that have made?"

"Why, none, of course, as far as you are concerned. You wouldn't have dared. But we were thinking, supposing Peggy had discovered it, what a horrible fright she would have got."

"Indeed. And so you at once assume that mistletoe grows in America; and you are also quite sure that Miss Peggy knows what it means?"

"What?" she says, as she prepares to slip back again into the saloon. "Peggy not know? Peggy not know what a branch of mistletoe means? I wonder what there is in that direction that Peggy doesn't know!"

Well, well. Man's inhumanity to man has often been bewailed by the poets; but man's inhumanity to man is the veriest milk and honey compared to the inhumanity which a woman, without the least hesitation or scruple, will inflict on her so-called bosom-friend.

CHAPTER VII.

“My time, O ye Muses, was happily spent,
When Phœbe went with me wherever I went ;
Ten thousand sweet pleasures I felt in my breast :
Sure never fond Shepherd like Colin was blest !
But now she is gone, and has left me behind,
What a marvellous change on a sudden I find !
When things were as fine as could possibly be,
I thought 'twas the Spring ; but alas ! it was she.”

THE ancient little town of Wallingford, as every schoolboy ought to know—but probably doesn't—has as much history crammed into its annals as would furnish subject-matter for twenty lectures. The destruction of its walls by the Parliamentary army was an affair of but the other day, so to speak—a quite recent occurrence, when you come to treat of the chronicles of Wallingford. Why, they had a Mint established here before the Norman Conquest ! Can it be wondered at, then, that when we go on shore for a prowl through this

venerable borough, Miss Peggy should naturally associate herself with the only member of the party capable of giving her a clear and comprehensive view of the transactions of the last dozen centuries? The frivolity of youth may be acceptable for the moment; the singing of "Green Bushes" and strumming on guitars, and such nonsense, may pass an idle evening; but when the ingenuous mind seeks for higher things—when it asks for instruction and lucid and ample and accurate information—it is to age, or at least to a respectable seniority, that it unhesitatingly turns. Mr. Jack Duncombe seemed surprised that his companion of the previous day should so wantonly forsake him, and march off without a word of apology. But what did *he* know about Saxons and Danes? He would have put Archbishop Laud and Sir William Blackstone into the same century; and, just as likely as not, he would have gloried in his ignorance.

And yet, as we perambulate the damp and almost deserted streets of the little town, on this dull, blowy, uncertain, grey-skied morning, it is not of history, ancient or modern, that Miss Peggy is talking. A suggestion has been made to her that we should try to obtain, somewhere or other, a newspaper, to

find out what has been occurring all this time throughout the inhabited globe. Miss Peggy distinctly objects.

"No, no," she says; "it is far more delightful to be cut off from everybody and everything. Never mind what has been happening. They are all minding their own affairs; and they have forgotten us; and we are much better to be entirely by ourselves."

"And empires may be going to smash, and you don't care!"

"I'll tell you what I should like to do now," she says. "I should like to be able to pop up to the sun, for just a single day, and go round with him, and see the whole thing—see how everything was going on all the way round, and what it all looked like—and then come back and alight at the same place at the end of the twenty-four hours."

"Your notions of science are primitive, Miss Peggy."

"Oh! I hate science," she says, pausing for a second at a milliner's shop-window, and then coming on again; "I just hate science. It never tells you anything that interests you. I don't care a cent whether there is or is not carbonate of soda in the moon. I like living things—human beings, mostly."

"But not too many of them at once?"

"Why, science can't tell you what the life of a butterfly is, let alone the life of a costermonger, or a priest, or an actress——"

"Or a young lady whose pastime is the destruction of the peace of mind of young men?"

"Well, anything you like," she says carelessly. "I don't want to know what chemicals I'm made up of. I want to know why the look of some women makes me distrust or dislike them; and why you take to other women, almost at first sight, and want to be friends with them; and why you detest some men, and why other men are—well, not so detestable: things of that kind are really interesting. I should like to know how we came to be in the world at all—and every one of us different from the other, that's the odd thing; and where we are going when we leave it?"

"Wouldn't it be easier to decide where you think you deserve to go?"

"Ah," she says, and it is a bootmaker's window she is looking into now, for these things seem strangely civilised after our solitary intercourse with meadows and trees and water and clouds, "I have told you before: if only you

were honest, you would admit that you never met anyone as good as I am ; and you would say that I behave like a perfect angel."

"I am ready to swear to both. The fact is that your behaviour at present is not only very good, but so good as to be suspicious."

She forsakes the bootmaker's window.

"Let's see, what were we talking about?" she asks, though her eyes are covertly laughing.

"You were assuming that the sun went round the earth, for one thing."

"Oh, I hate astronomy," she says, perhaps glad enough to get away to this new subject. "There is no plan in astronomy, no regularity; everything is different from everything else; and that is what makes it difficult to understand. Now, for example, why shouldn't there be a crescent sun as well as a crescent moon?"

"There ought to be a crescent sun, certainly, if you think so. By the way, wasn't it at some parsonage near this same town of Wallingford that Soapy Sam of Winchester was visiting when the page-boy was sent to call him in the morning? Don't you remember the story?"

Her eyes are inscrutable.

“Don’t you? Why, the page had been enjoined to address the Bishop as ‘my lord’; but he got confused; and when he knocked at the door—don’t you remember the story?”

A small twinkle comes into her eyes.

“What made you weep, grandmother dear, when the chestnut-bell was ringing?” remarks this impertinent American minx; and then she adds, irrelevantly—“Say, it isn’t really going to rain, is it?”

Now, this is a candid description of the kind of conversation that was going on; and everybody must see that if it wasn’t very coherent, nor yet very profitable for instruction, at least it was harmless enough. Why, therefore, that young man should have kept worrying, and interfering, and bothering us with his townhalls and old churches and Roman remains simply passes one’s comprehension. To humour him, we went away down a stable-yard—belonging to the George Inn, I think—in order to look at a door of carved wood which, he said, had originally belonged to Wallingford Castle. It was very old, he informed us. He added that it was of Spanish pine. And when we suggested that so valuable a relic (he said it was valuable) need not have been disfigured with a

coat of hideous paint, he seemed hurt. And when Miss Peggy said she wanted to go and find a "store" where she could get some silk and wool for her crewel work, Mr. Duncombe was left to continue his exploration of the antiquities of Wallingford in the society of his hostess, who, as ever, was bland towards him and complaisant.

On our return to the boat, and while we were making the necessary preparations for resuming our voyage, the weather looked as if it might turn to anything. The wind had risen; there was a surcharged sky; there were shifting gleams of light here and there.

"Before long, you will find a good deal of Constable about," is the general warning.

"That means waterproofs," says Mrs. Threepenny-bit, promptly. "I don't like good landscapy days. They always mean either waterproofs or sitting indoors."

Indeed, the words were hardly out of her mouth when the rain began—a few pattering drops, rapidly developing into a smart shower; in the midst of which both the women-folk summarily retreated into the saloon, leaving the navigators of this noble vessel to themselves.

"Well, we shall be in Oxford to-morrow,"

says the young man—and he need not look so exceedingly depressed simply because Miss Peggy has not paid him as much attention this morning as usual—“and I shall be glad of it. The real business of your trip will begin then. All this Thames affair is just a little bit too familiar.”

“To you, perhaps; but not to us. Besides, we are entertaining a young American stranger, who has never been up the Thames before, and who seems to like it well enough.”

He declines to speak about Miss Rosslyn.

“The Thames has been done by everybody; I am looking forward to something more novel.”

“And you are likely to get it, too, if all they say is true about those disused canals. But what have you to complain of now—except the rain, and that’s going off? Why, we were told we should find the Thames overcrowded; and yet we have had it practically to ourselves. Do you want anything more solitary and remote?”

If he had had the honesty to confess it, it was his solitariness at this moment that was weighing on his spirits; for he was listening to the distant tinkling of a banjo. Any sane person would instantly have construed that

into an invitation, and would have gone away forward to the saloon; but young people, when they have taken offence, are peculiar. Here he was quarrelling with the Thames, which a good many folk have declared to be a beautiful river. It was a pity he could not urge objections against the Nameless Barge, for that was chiefly of his own designing. He could not even find fault, decently, with the weather, for it was doing its very best to improve—already there was a pale, watery sunlight breaking through the clouds, and wandering over the misty green landscape. Why did not he forthwith summon the two women to come out again? Because Miss Peggy, who was a diligent young lady, had to go away and buy silk and wool and things of that kind when she should have been searching with him for the remains of Roman walls?

It was left for someone else to summon them. Murdoch, having finished with his duties of the morning, had smartened himself up, and now came forth from his quarters.

“Will I tek the tiller, Sir?”

“No, thank you.”

Before going in again, in sailor-like fashion he gave a rapid glance to his surroundings.

And very likely he may have been thinking that here was a capital sailing-day just being thrown away and wasted. The breeze that was blowing us onward was strong enough to raise the silvery surface of the river into hurrying waves; the willows were rustling and bending, their foliage now grey, now green; the buttercups were nodding in the meadows, or lying prone before the blast. And in this brief look round, something caught his attention—certain lilac-grey and white birds circling round, or darting this way and that, against the leaden-hued and windy sky. Murdoch regarded them with astonishment.

“Bless me!” he said, apparently to himself.
“They’re no’ sea-swallows!”

“But they are,” one of us answers him;
“and they mean remarkably bad weather when they make their appearance in these parts.”

“Well, well—indeed, now!” said he, still eyeing them with an astonished curiosity.
“And it iss a long weh from home that they hef come.”

Clearly Murdoch imagines that the terns have come all the way from the Sound of Mull, or Loch Sunart, or some such distant place;

but the next moment he disappears. We cannot hear him; but we know he is tapping at the door of the saloon. Presently two women appear at the bow, one of them holding on her sailor-hat, for the breeze is brisk.

"Do you see those terns?" the other one cries, in the teeth of the wind.

"Yes, of course," answers the man at the wheel.

"What are they doing here?"

"Raising a storm. Don't you know that we are simply flying?—we shall be dragging Coriolanus along directly."

"What do terns mean by——"

The sentence was never completed, for a startled yell from the steersman suddenly rent the air. The tow-line had caught on a stump. Palinurus, with his gaze as usual fixed on the far horizon, was paying no heed; and by the time that the cry of alarm had recalled him to his senses, the Nameless Barge had quietly slewed round, and run its nose, gently but firmly, into a bank of mud, rushes, willow-shrubs, and miscellaneous water-weeds.

One of us, of course, has to go to the bow, as Palinurus sadly returns to unhitch the line; for in such an emergency what are women good for but sarcasm?

"You were boasting just a little too much of your speed!" says the elder fiend.

"It was those confounded birds—everybody was looking at them."

"Tern, Fortune, tern thy wheel, and lower the proud," says the younger one, in an undertone; but she need not have been afraid—in any case the wind would have prevented Jack Duncombe from overhearing her flippant impertinence.

That ignominious stoppage took place on the stretch of water between Benson Lock and Shillingford Bridge; but we were soon on our way again—the favouring wind making of the labour of Coriolanus a mere holiday task. In due course of time we had passed Shillingford and the mouth of the small river Thame; and had caught sight, across the fields, of Dorchester Abbey, and also of the sinuous lines of the fortifications of a Roman camp. We moored for luncheon by the side of a meadow just above Day's Lock. Here the bank is a few feet high; so that, sitting at table, we found that the buttercups and dandelions and daisies, all swaying and nodding in this brisk breeze, were just level with our windows and our view. The banquet was not attended with state. Our only companions

were the swallows skimming along and across the stream. We had no brass band playing ; but there was a lark singing high in the heavens, and somewhere, in the distance, the occasional carol of a thrush. The only other sound was the rippling of the wind-ruffled water along the sides of the boat. For stillness, and solitariness, and silence, we might have been in the depths of a Canadian forest.

Now, during all this time these two young people had not approached each other ; and of course it was not for Miss Peggy to make the first advances, even if she had been so inclined. And in any case he did not give her the opportunity ; for he devoted himself entirely to Queen Tita ; and as he was talking to her in a half-scornful, half-petulant fashion, we guessed that once more the critics were catching it. Some scraps of his conversation reached us.

"I wish the newspaper-offices could be flooded with carbolic acid," we overheard him say, rather angrily.

"Why?" asked Queen Tita, with much civility.

"Because the scientific fellows say that carbolic acid destroys low organisms."

"Yes?" she said again, not understanding.

“ Well, the number of critics would be considerably reduced.”

“ If the dramatic critics,” one interposed, to put this foolish boy straight, “ are like the literary critics, you wouldn’t find one of them in the newspaper-offices. You would be more likely to find them in South Kensington, living in palatial houses, each with his brougham, and their wives going to Drawing-Rooms and Foreign Office receptions. Do you still imagine there is such a place as Grub-street ? ”

And yet again we could hear Queen Tita telling him of some of her adventures in Italy, and magnifying the mercilessness of the mosquitoes in certain of the towns ; and when she spoke of having been stung so badly, on one occasion, that her arm was swollen from the hand up to the elbow, he said—

“ Of course the mosquito must have been feeding on some putrid object—a critic, most likely.”

Whereupon Miss Peggy asked, in a low voice—

“ Were they very severe about his comedy ? ”

That, however, is a question which one cannot answer her ; because plays by novices are not very interesting to the ordinarily busy

person in this country; while newspaper criticism of plays by novices fails still more to arouse the attention. Besides, at the time that Jack Duncombe's piece was produced, we knew hardly anything about him.

We had to wait a considerable time for the return of Old Pal, for it appeared that, he having gone to fetch a bucket of water for Coriolanus, that gallant steed had wandered off into space, and had got near to Dorchester before he was found. But he in no wise refused to resume his appointed task; he took to it quite placidly; and once more we were peacefully gliding through the still landscape. The afternoon was clearing, though there was still an April look about the banked-up clouds, with their breadths of bronze or saffron-hued lights here and there. A touch of blue was visible in places; the various tints of the foliage had grown more vivid; at last there was a glimmer of pale sunlight on the rippling water. Indeed, there was more of Constable than of Corot, now, as the world seemed to emerge from the prevailing mist. And so we went on by Clifton Hampden, and by Appleford, and by Sutton Courtney (Miss Peggy was of opinion that these old English names were a good deal prettier than Clearanceville,

Cuttingsville, and the like); the most exciting incident the while being the sudden scurrying across a field of a hare, that sits up on its haunches and regards us, looking singularly red among the green; or the whirring away of a brace of partridges, put up by Coriolanus, the birds eventually subsiding into a wide and golden sea of buttercups.

We had had some thoughts of pushing on to Oxford that evening; but as rain began to fall again, and as we wished Miss Peggy's first impressions of the famous University town to be favourable, we resolved upon passing the night at Abingdon. Indeed, we were all of us glad to get in out of the wet; and when waterproofs had been removed, and candles lit, the blinds drawn, and Murdoch's ministrations placed on the table, it did not much matter to us what part of England happened to be lying alongside our gunwale. Miss Peggy, it may be said, was quite preoccupied about this city of Oxford; a great part of the afternoon she had spent in reading up the history of the various colleges, in such guide-books as we had with us; and it was understood that, until the weather improved, we should go no further, but rather give up the

time to showing her over the most interesting of these foundations.

"And you will find other objects of interest, Peggy," her hostess says to her. "You will see a great many very good-looking lads, all with their college cap and gown on."

"You said they called themselves men as soon as they went to Oxford?" Miss Peggy observes—for she is always curious about English ways and customs.

"So they do, but they're mostly boys, all the same. And very pretty boys, too—of the unmistakable English type—light-haired, clear-complexioned, and clear-eyed; nearly all of them well-built, athletic-looking young fellows. Oh, yes, you will find some objects of interest in the Oxford streets! And, of course, you can't expect but that they may look at you a little—just the least possible thing, as you go by."

Miss Peggy shifts the subject, as one having no concern for her.

"Do you know an inn called the Mitre?" she asks innocently.

"Of course we do."

"But they say it dates from the fourteenth century!" she says, glancing towards one of

the guide-books as though the compiler of it had been trying to impose on her.

“ Well ? ”

“ The fourteenth century ? ” she continues. “ Why, that was long and long before Shakespeare’s time. And if the inn was there when he lived I suppose he must have passed it every time he went to Stratford or came back to London. Oxford is on the high road to Stratford, isn’t it ? ”

“ Undoubtedly.”

“ And do you mean that Shakespeare really passed this inn every time—or, perhaps, slept the night in it ? ”

“ Well, tradition says there was another inn in Oxford—the Crown—that was his favourite haunt. But certainly he must have passed the Mitre—though it was probably not in all its parts precisely the same building that you’ll find there to-day.”

“ But, really—he used to ride along the same street that we shall be in to-morrow ? ” she says, in a half-bewildered way. “ Well, you can’t understand how strange that is to me. These things and places seem to us at home to be so very far away when we read about them—it is all like a kind of fairy-land. You don’t expect ever to see the actual street.”

"Come, now, Miss Peggy," one of us says to her, "how will this do? We shall probably have to remain in Oxford for two or three days. There are some arrangements to be made; we have to find out somebody who is familiar with the canals; and we have to get a horse for him as well; and a lot of things of that kind. Then you want to see the colleges, and one or two of the libraries and museums. Besides that, we have several friends in the place, who will expect us to call on them, and they will be only too anxious to entertain a simple-minded young American stranger, so long as she behaves herself. And then, again, we don't want you to see our English scenery through a deluge of rain; we must wait for better weather. Now, Folly Bridge, where we shall moor this stately vessel, is a good bit away from the centre of the town, and it might be a nuisance to be continually driving or walking backwards and forwards, and what I want to know is this—supposing we were to put up for these two or three days at an inn, and supposing that inn to be the one you were talking about—the Mitre, in the High-street—how would that suit your views?"

"Do you mean it?" says Miss Peggy, with

a flash of delight in her sufficiently expressive eyes: no further answer is needed.

"What *we* think of the proposal," says Queen Tita, in her grand manner, to her neighbour the budding Dramatist, "is of no consequence. Oh, no! *Our* convenience is not to be consulted in any way whatever. It is nothing that we shall have to pack up all over again, just when we were getting everything into its proper place. We pretend to go away on a boating expedition, and pass the time in inns, just because a person—a person—comes from America whose mind runs upon bygone centuries. And it is that person who is to say yes or no. Everything is to be done for *her*. *We* are not of the least account; everything is to be arranged to suit the whims of the American person."

Miss Peggy looks doubtful; she seems uncertain as to whether this remonstrance is wholly a pretence.

"I am sure," she says, regarding Queen Tita with honest eyes, "that I am quite willing to keep to the boat, if anyone wishes it—yes, and very gladly too. It will be very unfair if you allow me to interfere with what anyone else may wish just for want of telling me."

"Peggy, don't be silly!" her hostess says abruptly, but not with much unkindness. "Why, you will be quite delighted with the old-fashionedness of the Mitre, if you are able to preserve your wits in trying to remember your way along the passages. And then, you're almost certain to see one of the University lads entertaining his friends at lunch in the coffee-room—that is very amusing—the superior airs of the host, and his directions to the waiter—the way the boys look at the wine before drinking it, and their affectation of indifference and manly self-possession. Unfortunately, when they have drunk a little champagne they are apt to forget their dignity, and then they begin to chaff the waiter, and laugh rather loudly at very small jokes. I suppose we sha'n't be allowed to go and sit in the billiard-room?—that ought to be interesting."

"Then you won't really mind the trouble of packing?" asks Miss Peggy, with a pretty air of innocence.

"Goodness gracious, child, don't you understand that we shall often have to put up at an hotel, if only to get our washing done? And the Mitre is in the middle of everything; it will be a hundred times more convenient than

this huddled-up caravansary. Peggy, wouldn't you like to drive out to Woodstock, and see Blenheim Park and Fair Rosamond's Well? Or, at least, to Godstow Nunnery, where she is supposed to be buried. Poor thing," says Queen Tita, absently, "I wonder whether they cut off all her beautiful hair when she entered the convent."

"Are you speaking of Fair Rosamond?" says Miss Peggy. "I thought Queen Eleanor poisoned her."

"They say not. They say she gave up all her splendour, and went into Godstow Nunnery, and lived in great penitence and piety for many years, and died and was buried there," says this learned person; and then she continues, "I don't know how it is, but the women in history who get most of our pity and sympathy are generally the women who haven't been quite what they ought to have been. I would rather have a bit of Mary Stuart's embroidery, done by her own hand, than all the jewels Queen Elizabeth ever wore."

"Do you think that possible," says Miss Peggy, with a sudden interest—"to get a scrap of sewing, no matter how small, that Mary Queen of Scots did with her own hand?"

No; surely not! Why, now, to think of having a treasure like that to show!——”

“There must be plenty of pieces, if only they could be identified,” says Mrs. Three-penny-bit (who has before now expressed her own vain desires in this direction), “for she spent the long years and years of her imprisonment in doing hardly anything else, and embroidery doesn’t easily perish. I should think some of the old Scotch families must have heirlooms of the kind. I wonder if Colonel Cameron would be likely to know. There, Peggy; there is an idea for you. Choose Sir Ewen Cameron to be your knight, and give him this quest——”

“But I never even heard of him,” says Miss Peggy.

“Oh! we know him well enough; we’ll ask him to come along, and get his commission from you. And he is a Highlander; he will do anything for a pretty face.”

At this moment there was a tapping at the door, and presently another Highlander—to wit, our faithful Murdoch—appeared, to clear the table; so that the project of equipping and sending forth a nineteenth-century Sir Galahad was for the present abandoned, if it was not quite forgotten by these two crazy folk.

We had no music this evening, for everyone was busy in getting his or her things ready for going ashore on the following morning. It was during these preparations that the senior members of the party unexpectedly found a chance of having a few words together privately.

"Have these two quarrelled?" says Mrs. Threepenny-bit.

"Not that I know of."

"The formality of their manner towards each other is rather odd after yesterday."

"Well; if he chooses to take offence because she refused to go traiking* about the streets of Wallingford with him, she will doubtless let him have his own way."

"You think that is all? I believe the mischievous wretch is playing him—and playing him very skilfully, too."

"She wouldn't take the trouble. She has been a good deal more interested in hearing about those colleges all day long."

"Well, at all events," says this tom-tit Machiavelli, "I am not very sorry that at present they are on terms of rather cool acquaintanceship. For we shall be seeing several people in Oxford; and it is as well

* This is a Scotch word difficult to translate accurately.

they should understand that, although these two are with us, nothing is meant by it. I don't want to have anything happen while the girl is under my charge. Match-making is a thankless office; and I hope to get to the end of this trip with both of those two innocents quite heart-whole. Innocents? Yes, a precious pair of innocents *they* are! My private impression is that the one is as bad as the other; and if anything happens to either of them, it will be richly deserved. I shouldn't wonder if she taught him a lesson he wasn't expecting. But in the meantime——”

“Yes?”

“In the meantime,” Queen Tita says, with a laugh, “Peggy is just a little too well-behaved for me. Where's all her fun? I wanted a lively companion; she's as prim as a school-miss.”

“You cannot have everything. You told her before we started that you were doubtful as to the way she might behave; and now she is showing you, from hour to hour, from day to day, that there is not a more properly conducted young lady in the whole of this land.”

“Oh, yes—when she is studying English history—Magna Charta—the Barons—and so

forth—and running the boat aground at the same time. Do you think I don't know why she wanted to get away and buy silk and wool this morning? '*Unter vier Augen*' is Peggy's motto. And you will see how she will befool those old fogies at Oxford to-morrow—her timid inquiries—her pretended reverence for the founders—her courteous interest in everything; and all the time she will be perfectly aware that she is reducing some learned old Professor, or Proctor, or Doctor, to the condition of a jelly. If you could only see Peggy's face when she turns round, after having listened with the profoundest attention to some dreadful old bore——”

“Will you stop talking about her, anyway; and take such things as you want; and get out? Duncombe will be back here in a minute.”

“I tell you this,” she says, as she prepares to depart with a bundle of articles enclasped in her arms, “that before Peggy has done with Mr. Duncombe, she will teach him not to speak so patronisingly about girls. He will be singing a different tune before Peggy has finished with him.”

Alas! for our fond desire that Miss Peggy should approach Oxford under favourable in-

fluences of weather. All that night it rained hard; in the morning it was raining hard; when we left Abingdon it was pouring in torrents. There was half-a-gale blowing, too; and no easy task was it to steer this long and unwieldy craft against the heavy current, with a stiff breeze knocking her about at the same time. A more doleful picture than that around us could hardly be conceived—the leaden and lowering sky, the dull, coffee-coloured river, the dark meadows, the dripping willows and elms and chestnuts; and yet, when Queen Tita mournfully asked if this were the merry month of May, she received her answer from the shore, for through the dismal pall of rain we could see that the slopes of Nuneham were blue with wild hyacinths.

“Bell’s children,” says a mite of a creature, from within the monkish cowl of her waterproof, “say that I’m always in a tempest, when I go over to drive them away from their books, and into the open air. Well, if they saw me now, they might think it was literally true.”

“They call her Auntie Cyclone,” Miss Peggy is informed, “and that is a very good name for her, only much too complimentary. She isn’t

a cyclone at all: she's only a shallow disturbance."

"Ah! did he say such things about you?" says Miss Peggy, in consolatory tones; and she even puts her hand on her friend's arm, to comfort her. But is there anything more ludicrous and ineffectual than the endeavour of two women to display sympathy or affection for each other while they are encased in waterproofs? The india-rubber seems to act as a non-conductor of kindness. Besides, their cuffs are tight, and their hands are cold, and usually there is rain running down their noses. On this occasion, Queen Tita prefers to take no notice; she merely resumes her wail about the weather.

"And just as we are coming to Iffley, too—to the mill and the bridge and the poplars that have been painted from every inch of difference of a point of view! And the river as you get near to Oxford—why, it is quite a pretty sight to see the various boats, and the barges moored by Christ Church Meadow, and all those young lads looking so brisk and healthy, and full of life and enjoyment! Well, we may get a better day before we leave Oxford."

We are not likely to encounter a worse.

The rain keeps pegging away, in a steady, unmistakable, business-like fashion, as we draw nearer to those half-hidden spires among the trees. The river is quite deserted; there is not a single boat out on the swollen and rushing stream. The long row of barges, notwithstanding their gay colours and gilding and decorations, look so many pictures of misery; and would appear to be quite untenanted but that here and there a curl of smoke from a stove-pipe suggests that some solitary steward or care-taker is trying to keep himself warm. And so we get on to Salter's rafts, and secure our moorings there; while Jack Duncombe good-naturedly volunteers to remain behind and settle up with Palinurus, and see our luggage forwarded to the hotel.

In a few minutes three of us are in a cab, and driving through the wan, cold, dripping, black-grey thoroughfares. And it is little that the grave and learned seniors of those halls and colleges—and it is little that the younger Fellows, snugly ensconced in their bachelor rooms—it is very little indeed they suspect that a certain White Pestilence has arrived in Oxford town.

CHAPTER VIII.

“But now secure the painted vessel glides,
The sunbeams trembling on the floating tides :
While melting music steals upon the sky,
And softened sounds along the waters die ;
Smooth flow the waves, the zephyrs gentle play—
Belinda smiled, and all the world was gay.”

WHEN, after dreary days of rain, one wakens some fine morning, and instinctively turns one's eyes towards the window, and finds that outside the blessed sunlight is pouring down on a cluster of scarlet geraniums—making the translucent petals a glory and wonder of colour—then joy rushes in upon the soul. We did not spend much time over dressing and breakfasting that morning ; we were too eager to be out ; and when at last we emerged from the inn, behold ! all this town of Oxford had undergone a magic transformation. The grey houses had turned to yellow ; over them there

were masses of silver-white cloud slowly sailing through the blue ; a soft, fresh wind was blowing ; life and gladness were everywhere. Of course, we made straight away for Folly Bridge ; and there the flooded and rapid river was glancing and shimmering in the sun ; and the elms and chestnuts and poplars were all swaying and rustling in the breeze. It is true that our newly-acquired skipper and pilot—Captain Columbus, Miss Peggy had named him, on account of the unknown regions into which he was about to conduct us—as he looked down from the bridge on the swollen and rushing stream, seemed to think it would be rather a tough job to get the Nameless Barge round by the Isis to the first lock of the canal ; and the young lad who was to act as driver—the Horse-Marine we proposed to call him, with reference to his double duties—was lounging about with a certain air of indifference ; while Murdoch, being wholly ignorant of this kind of sailing, was discreetly silent. But we were anxious to make a start ; and so it was arranged that, as our women-folk had still some things to purchase (not knowing when they might see a shop again), we should go back through the town, and meet our boat later on at the beginning of the canal, if

peradventure the crew were able to take her thither.

Now, whether it was that this gay morning had raised Miss Peggy's spirits, and thereby in a measure softened her heart, or whether it was that she was bent on a little wilful mischief after having played Miss Propriety—to perfection, be it said—during these past few days, she was now showing herself a good deal kinder to Jack Duncombe, and he was proportionately grateful, as he went with the women from shop to shop and carried their parcels for them. Perhaps it would be more generous to say that she was merely giving the rein to her natural good-humour—for she was a friendly kind of creature, and not apt to take offence. Anyhow, if Jack Duncombe was pleased by her marked amiability, he was not too obviously overwhelmed. If he was ready, on small encouragement, to become her slave, he wore his chains with a certain lightness of heart, or cunningly professed to do so. And this entirely won the approval of our Governor - General - in - Petticoats, who smiled benignly on them both, and seemed to think they were very good children indeed.

“Oh, yes, it's all right,” she says (and, of course, she knows everything), as we are

putting our traps together at the hotel. "They're only in fun. I fancied once or twice that Peggy meant serious mischief, and the way she played you off against him was very clever—oh, yes, very skilful indeed; but I really think she will let him alone now. I suppose she sees that she could do for him if she chose, and that is enough for Peggy. Besides, she has had a fair turn at it these last few days."

"Why, you said yourself to her last night that she had behaved herself perfectly!"

"So she did; it wasn't her fault that the men made idiots of themselves. I wonder if that Mr. A'Becket will really come out to see us to-morrow. I shouldn't be a bit surprised; but as for his overtaking us by walking along the canal-bank—well, I know what that meant—that was to give Peggy the notion that he was a tremendous athlete, and could do his five miles an hour with perfect ease. An athlete—in a black frock coat with long tails, and his hat on the back of his head!"

"My dear, when intellect bulges out a man's forehead, so that he has to wear his hat on the back of his head, it is not a matter for scorn, but for reverence. Mr. A'Becket is a Fellow of his college. He has written several letters

to the *Times* on the important subject of Elementary Education. His 'Critical Studies of the Cartesian Philosophy' are read and admired wherever—wherever—well, wherever they are to be found."

"He has got long front teeth, and his eyes are like boiled gooseberries," she says, with the maddening irrelevance of womankind; and that ends the discussion.

We went to the Canal Company's office to get our permit, and then walked along to the first lock—a little toy-box kind of basin it looked; and there we loitered about for a while in expectation of the Nameless Barge making its appearance. Time passed, and there was no sign. Of course it was all very well for those young people to be placidly content with this delay, and to heed nothing so long as they could stroll up and down in the sunlight and the blowing winds—her eyes from time to time showing that he was doing his best to amuse her; but more serious people, who had been reading in the morning papers of the hurricanes and inundations that had recently prevailed over the whole country, and whose last glimpse of the Isis was of a yellow-coloured stream rushing like a mill-race, began to be anxious. Accordingly, it

was proposed, and unanimously agreed, that we should make our way back along the river-bank, to gain some tidings.

When, at length, we came in sight of our gallant craft and her composite crew, we found that Captain Columbus was making preparations for getting her under a bridge, and also that about half the population of Oxford had come out to see the performance. When we looked at the low arch, and at the headstrong current, it was with no feelings of satisfaction ; nevertheless we all embarked, to see what was about to happen, and Murdoch took the tiller, while the tow-rope was passed to the Horse-Marine. Now, we should have run no serious risk but for this circumstance : half of the bridge had recently fallen down, and the authorities, instead of rebuilding it, had contented themselves with blocking up the roadway. Accordingly, when, as we had almost expected, the Nameless Barge got caught under the arch, we found the masonry just above our heads displaying a series of very alarming cracks ; and the question was as to which of those big blocks, loosened by the friction of the boat, would come crashing down on us. However, the worst that befell us was that we got our eyes filled with dust

and our hands half-flayed with the gritty stone, and eventually we were dragged through, and towed to a place of seclusion, where we could have our lunch in peace, the populace having been left behind by that opportune obstruction.

And that was but the beginning of our new experiences; for when—Columbus and the Horse-Marine having reappeared—we went on to the first lock of the canal, we found the toy-basin so narrow that we had to detach our fenders before we could enter. Then came another bridge that had almost barred our way by reason of the lowness of the arch. And that again was as nothing to the succeeding bridges we encountered as we got into the open country—drawbridges that had to be tilted up by hand, their rough beams hanging over us at an angle, and threatening to tear the roof off our floating house. Nevertheless, we managed to get on somehow, and these recurrent delays and difficulties only served to give variety and incident to our patient progress. Fortunately, the weather befriended us, though there was too much of an April look about. There were dazzling white clouds, and ominous purple ones; there were dashes of deep-blue sky; bursts of vivid sun-

light sweeping over the level landscape; buttercups and marigolds nodding here and there in the marshes. A Constable day; but without waterproofs, luckily. Queen Tita remarked that it was no wonder England excelled in landscape art, for no other country was possessed of so much weather, and the painters got every possible chance.

We passed the quiet little hamlet of Woolvercot, the only living creatures visible being some white geese on the green; and shortly thereafter we stopped our noble vessel for a second or two, and got out for a stroll along the tow-path. And a very pleasant stroll it was; the air was soft and sweet, the sunlight was more general now, and lay warmly on the hawthorn hedges and the grassy banks. Of course, Miss Peggy was busy with her study of English wild-flowers; and the young man who seemed rather glad to be her attendant did what he could to assist her; and as she got together wild hyacinths, and primroses, and speedwells, and forget-me-nots, and Rosalind's "daisies pied and violets blue," she sometimes hummed or whistled a bit of the "Green Bushes" tune that had apparently got into her head.

"I sha'n't forget to write out that song for

you," said her companion—as if the assurance was needed!

"I think I know the air," she answered, "if you will kindly give me the words."

"Oh, you'd better let me write out the whole thing complete," he said. "Some day or other you may come across it, when you are away in America; and then it may remind you of this trip—and of some English friends," he made bold to add.

"I am not likely to forget either," said Miss Peggy, quietly, and without any embarrassment. Indeed, the relations that now existed between these two—for the moment, at least—were such as to command universal approval. She was kind to him, but not over-kind; while he was very attentive to her, but in a modest and respectful way. What, then, had become of the rather patronising air with which he had spoken of our Peggy, before he had ever set eyes on her? There was remarkably little of that now. Miss Peggy had quickly enough taught him "his place"; and though he was as eager and gay and talkative as ever—and as full of all kinds of literary and dramatic projects, which he recklessly intermixed with the sober and steady business of our sailing—still there was always something in his manner

towards Miss Peggy that showed that "patronage" was far from being in his mind.

- It turned out a clear and golden afternoon; and the westering light lay softly on the foliage of the willows and elms, on the wide and silent meadows where the cattle were, and on the banks nearer us that were yellow with buttercups.

"Why," says our young American friend, turning round for a moment, "this is not the least like what I expected. You would never think this was a canal—it is more like an exceedingly pretty and peaceful river. I thought a canal was a grimy place; and that we should have a good deal of rough company—indeed, I was quite prepared to put cotton-wool in my ears. But this is just beautiful; and we have it all to ourselves."

"The canals are grimy enough in some places," one says to her, "especially in the north; but we shall avoid these, as far as possible, and take you through nothing but primrose and cowslip country, so that you may fancy yourself Chloe, or Daphne, or Phoebe, and weave posies for yourself all day long, if you like. As for rough company, we don't seem to have company of any kind; and even if you were to hear some of the Birmingham

lads giving each other a dose of 'damson-pie'—that is the polite name they have for it—you wouldn't understand a single sentence. So you needn't be afraid, Miss Peggy. If you want to play Rosalind in the forest, it is all around you. And if there is no one to hang up verses about you on the trees, then it speaks ill for those young men of Oxford."

"Do you expect Mr. A'Becket to come and see us, Peggy?" asks Mrs. Threepenny-bit in a casual kind of way.

Miss Peggy glances rather swiftly at Jack Duncombe (who is quite imperturbable), and makes answer—

"How can I know? He is your friend."

"That was really a beautiful basket of roses he brought you yesterday afternoon," her hostess again remarks.

"I have just given them to Murdoch," the young lady says, with much simplicity. "They ought to look very pretty on the dinner-table."

And not only was Miss Peggy surprised and charmed by the pastoral character of this portion of her voyage, but also she was much interested in our getting through the locks. These rude little wooden boxes seemed to have been left for us years and years ago; and

as there was no one in charge of them, nor any living creature visible near them, we had to open and shut them for ourselves, thereby getting a sufficient amount of occupation and exercise. Jack Duncombe, of course, was chief engineer on such occasions, co-operating with the Captain; and it is well to allow young men of superfluous energy to have their way, especially when there is a fair spectator looking on whose favour they wish to obtain. Indeed, young Duncombe had been so obliging all day—so dexterous and indefatigable, and full of resource when we were in any small difficulties—that we thought him entitled to some consideration at the hands of our pretty Miss Peggy. And as for the man in the long coat, with his hat on the back of his head? Well, he might walk his five miles an hour till he was blue in the face, but there was no opinionated metaphysician going to make any part of the voyage with us. We should take care of that.

Whether the little hamlet of Hampton Gay is so-called in remembrance of certain historical high jinks, or whether it obtained its name from the prevailing character of its people, we could not learn; and all that we

saw of the place was an odd little church-spire peeping up from among the trees. Almost immediately thereafter we came to a lock, and, having passed through that, emerged into the swift-flowing and osiered Cherwell. Here abundant evidence of the recent floods was all around us—wide stretches of meadow had been turned into a continuous lake, with nothing to be seen but pollard-willows and half-submerged masses of marsh-marigold; the tow-path was under water, as our young friend Murdoch, being ashore, discovered to his cost, for he had to pick and splash his way along, while Columbus and the Horse-Marine had mounted their gallant steed and rode secure; and the Cherwell itself was coming down in extraordinary volume and with tremendous force. In fact, as this is a quite candid history, the writer of it will here confess—for the guidance of anyone who may attempt a similar expedition—that he was very nearly being the death of all those members of the party who happened to be afloat. Steering at the time, and observing that the heaviest rush of the river was along the western shore, he naturally thought he could cheat the current by edging out towards mid-stream, and proceeded to do so

with all imaginary caution. But the moment the heavy weight of water got a grip of the bow, the boat was twisted round, so that the full force of the stream bore down upon her broadside on; while the strain of the tow-ropē, acting at this awkward angle, proceeded to tilt us over in a very alarming fashion. It was an affair of only a moment or two; for by jamming the tiller over she was presently righted; and beyond a scream from the women, and a ghastly rattle of crockery in Murdoch's pantry, nothing happened. But it convinced us of two things: first, that it was well for us that the Nameless Barge had been constructed below on the lines of an ordinary boat, instead of being a flat-bottomed punt; and, secondly, that the steersman of a vessel that is being towed by a horse, should not try to be too clever when the stream is in heavy flood.

We were now to understand why it was we had come so far without encountering a single canal-barge. We arrived at a lock where there was quite a company of them congregated there for the night, afraid to face that furious current—or, rather, not afraid of facing it, but of being carried down by it, to the destruction of all proper steering-way.

And where was the griminess of these barges, now that we were amongst them? They were uncommonly smart, we thought. They were gay with landscapes painted in brilliant hues of scarlet and white, and yellow and purple—comprising Italian villas, cascades, snow-peaks, mountain bridges, and all kinds of romantic things; and there was a sententious simplicity about their names—"The Staff of Life," "Live and Learn," and so forth. As for the people, they seemed a quiet and civil folk; the men lent us a helping hand in getting through; the women—who were tidily furnished with head-gear, if their faces seemed hardened by exposure to wind and weather—eyed us as we passed with a natural curiosity; while some of the small fry popped out their heads to have a look.

"Poor little wretches!" says Queen Tita. "I hope they are not worried much by the school-inspectors. At all events, their life ought to be a good deal wholesomer and happier than the life of children in the London slums. They must get fresh air—in the daytime, at least; and they must get to know all about country things. Do you remember the story of the bird's-nest being taken into a ward in a children's hospital in

London, and not one of the poor little things able to tell what it was? They call for education and education, and they cram a lot of useless stuff into small brains that only get stupefied by it; and then you take some poor little fellow out into the country, and he can't tell the difference between a buttercup and a dandelion; and a sheep frightens him, and a mile's walking tires him——”

“Madam, will you please to speak less disrespectfully,” one of us interposes, “of a system that has been established by the collective wisdom of the country? I tell you that by means of education you can do everything——”

“Except teach people how to live.”

“If you want to see what education can do, look at America——”

“At America!” she says (for Peggy is not within hearing at the moment)—“at America—that makes no shame of walking away with the surplus of the Alabama money buttoned up in its pocket! I suppose that is the effect of education on the national conscience?”

“I tell you again that you do not understand the blessings of education. Why don't you consult some capable authority, and have

your invincible ignorance removed? Why don't you consult Mr. Algernon A'Becket, now——"

"Mr. Algernon A'Becket!" she says. But she stops short, for here comes Miss Peggy; and of course her innocent mind is not to be prejudiced against any person (whatever may be the colour of his eyes or the peculiarity of his front teeth) who has shown an exceptional interest in her.

Meanwhile, we had sailed once more into the silences; and the clear and golden afternoon had become a clear and golden evening; and the wide sheets of water, lying along the meadows, shone with a glory that the eyes could hardly bear. And perhaps it was that dazzling light, and the beautiful colour in the higher heavens, and our own solitariness, that made Queen Tita say, rather wistfully,

"I could almost think we were lying becalmed in Loch-na-Keal, and looking out to the west—to Little Colonsay, and Staffa, and the Dutchman. Ah! Peggy; we have something to show you yet before you go back home!"

"More beautiful than this?" says the girl; for she is a contented creature, and happy in her surroundings, whatever they may be.

"But it isn't fair to ask you. Why, you are just like Murdoch. Do you know what he did yesterday? He had got a newspaper sent him from Scotland, from some friend of his; and he brought it to me, and showed me an advertisement of a yacht for sale—a full description of it—and he wanted me to take it to you and persuade you to either buy or hire her for the autumn. He did not say anything against this trip; but you could see what he was thinking."

"And what did you say to him?"

"I told him I could hardly do that, for it would look as if I were asking you to take me with you."

"But will you come, Peggy?" immediately and eagerly asks this brazen piece of audacity, who seems to assume that whenever she and any girl-friend of hers—who happens to have pretty eyes, and pretty ways, and a weakly-pretended contempt for men—choose to plan out a further holiday for themselves, a yacht must be provided for them forthwith, irrespective of the trifling question of cost. Fortunately, Miss Peggy has a little more common-sense.

"Don't tempt me," she says. "From the way you speak of all those places, I know it

must be just beyond anything. But the 'old folks at home' will be thinking I have been away long enough. And, besides, it isn't wise to exhaust all your pleasures at once. You will let me look forward to going with you, some day, to your pet places; and it will be something to think about, and dream about, when I am thousands of miles away from you."

"Well, that is a bargain, Peggy," says Mrs. Threepenny-bit; and she puts her hand within the girl's arm. "Whenever you have the opportunity of coming with us for a month, or two months, in the summer or autumn, we will go on a yachting cruise together—and then you will see something. For I consider you have been a very good girl, and quite a pattern of behaviour, and I will give you a certificate of character whenever you want it."

Now, what moved Miss Peggy, almost directly thereafter, to the following piece of mischief? The present writer is convinced that it was simply the transparent honesty of the girl, who knew well enough that she was not deserving of the praise bestowed on her, and was resolved to amend Mrs. Threepenny-bit's too high estimate of her. When the elder of the two women said—

"Come along, Peggy; I see Murdoch is lighting the candles—we must get ready for dinner——"

Miss Peggy, instead of immediately following, lingered for a moment.

"Have you got the little cigar-cutter I gave you?" she said, in a rapid undertone.

"I should think I have!"

"Can't you fasten it on again to your watch-chain?"

"In a kind of a way."

"Well, do! I want you to wear it at dinner. You'll see something."

A little while thereafter, in obedience to Murdoch's summons, we found ourselves taking our places at table; and the first thing we discovered was that Miss Peggy had had time to change her dress, and now wore a very pretty and simple costume that seemed to suit her excellently well. Of some slightly roughish material it was, and cream-white, with vertical blue stripes; and at the neck, just underneath the plain linen collar, there was a band of dark blue velvet. It was on this dark band that there gleamed conspicuous an oblong silver ornament, which the person sitting next her instantly recognised as a pencil-case ingeniously set as a brooch. The

jeweller in Oxford deserved credit for this piece of workmanship ; and certainly he could not have been long over it.

For the first few minutes the trinket remained unnoticed ; but presently Queen Tita's attention was caught by it ; and at once she put down the spoon she held in her hand.

"Well, upon my word !" she exclaimed. "Before my very eyes ! Did you ever see such disgraceful effrontery !"

And then she glanced across the table.

"And look at the other one !—look what he has at his watch-chain !" she says to Jack Duncombe. "Did you ever see such shamelessness in a Christian country ? I wish my two sons were here—they wouldn't see their mother insulted——"

"But I have only done what you yourself suggested !" says Miss Peggy, with an air of simple wonder that was beautiful to behold.

"Don't you remember it was your own suggestion ?—and I thought it was so kind of you and so clever of you to think of it——"

"Yes ; and why the secrecy ? Why the sneaking out in Oxford, and never a word said about it ? Why the conspiracy to spring a surprise on us ?"

"But you had so many things to attend to

in Oxford that I thought I needn't bother you with my small affairs," says Miss Peggy; and the perfect candour of her eyes would have bamboozled an Old Bailey lawyer out of his wits.

"Your small affairs, you wretch! Do you think you can impose on me with your pretended innocence?"

"Don't you pay any attention to them, Miss Peggy," one of us says to her. "What do they understand about faithfulness and devotion? I suppose they thought, when they took you away from the simple pleasures of the country, and plunged you into the wild whirl of gaieties at Oxford——"

"Tea and talk!" says Peggy.

"—that you would forsake old friends. When they led you away through dazzling halls, and would distract you with a thousand revelries, they little dreamed that there was still constancy in your heart. How could they know that one always returns—no matter what comes between—to one's first loves?"

"I wonder how many you would have to return to, if you began," says Queen Tita, spitefully.

"They fancied that the sympathy between two kindred souls was to be destroyed by

three and a half days' gallivanting about Oxford! And callous and unfeeling worldlings might think so too; but we will show them something different; we will be a lesson to them; our constancy will be celebrated in legend and ballad——”

“Yes,” says Miss Peggy, with eyes cast down. “‘And out of her grave there grew a red rose; and out of her knight's a sweet-briar.’”

“Precisely so. I know they will quote us in song and story, as a shining example:—

‘Jeunesse trop coquette,
Ecoutez la leçon
Que vous fait Henriette,
Et son amant Damon.’”

“Are you listening to them?” says Queen Tita to her neighbour, in awestruck tones.

“Yes,” says Jack Duncombe, “it *does* sound a little improper.”

“And to think that a simple Highland lad like Murdoch should be coming and going—I wonder what his opinion is——”

As the simple Highland lad happened to come in at this moment, she had to stop her envious chatter; and was fain to turn to her companion with some idle request that he should pass the salt.

All this time, it must be remembered, we were steadily and silently gliding through the now fast darkening country. As to where we were, or where we should pass the night, we had not the remotest idea. For one thing, our studies of Ordnance Survey maps had at least taught us this—that canals are not as other highways. The ancient highways, such as rivers and roads, have had centuries and centuries to draw population to them, so that the life of a district is mostly visible there; while the chief modern line of communication, the railway, has generally been engineered so as to pick up any considerable villages in its course. But the peculiar difficulties in the construction of canals have, in the majority of instances, prevented their projectors from doing much beyond aiming at the chief objective points; so that, when you leave one of these—such as Oxford, or Napton, or Warwick, or Rugby, as a rule you find yourself going through districts that are apparently uninhabited. If a foreigner were to see England in this way, he would find it hard to give credence to the familiar statistics about relative proportion of population to area in this and other countries. Of course, it mattered nothing to us whether we were near a village

or not. We had our house with us, and were well content to be without neighbours. Our only concern was that Captain Columbus, the horse, and the Horse-Marine should find quarters for the night; and as Columbus professed himself well acquainted with the Oxford Canal, at least, we had no immediate anxiety on that score.

Dinner over, Jack Duncombe, without any entreaty or apology, handed Miss Peggy her banjo; and she, good-naturedly, took that proceeding as a matter of course. First of all, to try the strings, she played the "Daisy" clog-dance, which met with much approval. Then she said—

"Did you ever hear the tragic story of Dinah Snow?"

We had never heard it.

"Well, I will sing it to you; and you must all join in the chorus, mind. This is the chorus."

She played a few notes of prelude—that at once struck us as strangely familiar—and beautiful, too—and then she sang—

"O my witching Dinah Snow, O my witching Dinah Snow,
She met her death by drowning in the river Ohio."

"But wait a minute, Peggy," interposes

Mrs. Threepenny-bit, in considerable wonderment. "Why, that's 'The Wearing of the Green'!"

"Of course it is," says Miss Peggy, complacently.

"What a shame!"

"I don't see that. I suppose no one knows what were the words originally sung to those old airs——"

"Quite right—hear, hear!" Peggy's faithful ally ventures to put in.

"And the story of Dinah Snow is as pathetic as anything you could wish for. Now listen; and don't forget the chorus."

We began to think that Miss Peggy was making a fool of us on this occasion; for, although she sang the song with much feeling, still there was a curious ingenuousness about the words which provoked doubt. What could one make of this?—

"'Twas a dark and dreary night, the stormy winds did blow,

She went on board the horse-boat to cross the Ohio;

The waves ran high, and in the deep her graceful form did go,

The river's cold embrace received my pretty Dinah Snow."

This piece of literature, it must be confessed, puzzled us; and it is just possible that Miss

Peggy might have been sharply brought to task for singing a comic song to one of the finest of the old Irish airs, had she not put such evident good faith into her rendering of it. So we all, in such dulcet tones as Heaven had dealt to us, bewailed the fate of poor Dinah Snow; and then, mercifully to cheer us up a bit, our pretty Peggy sang, "There's a happy little home down in Southern Tennessee," and several others that we had established as favourites since she first came among us with her banjo and her audacious ways.

Now, it has been observed that Queen Tita is easily taken captive by a contralto voice; and when the girl ceased for a moment or so, she said—

"Peggy, I wish you were 'a wave of the sea'—you remember the nice things that were said to Perdita; and that you could go on for ever. And it's awfully good of you to have brought your banjo with you. What should we do to show our gratitude to you? Would you like a testimonial? Or a vote of thanks?"

Instantly there is a flash of wicked triumph in Miss Peggy's eyes.

"May I wear this brooch, then?" she asks.

But the little woman is equal to the occasion.

"That brooch?" she answers, with much

indifference. "Why, of course. What do I care? He may give a brooch to every woman in the country, for anything it matters to me. And you needn't suppose you are the only favoured one," she adds, with a perfectly gratuitous malice.

"At all events, I know the sort of brooch you should wear," one says to her. "It ought to have dark blue stones in it. And then one could call you Sapphira with impunity—and with truth."

"In the meantime," says Mr. Jack Duncombe, not without some reason, "don't you think we should ask Columbus whether he has any notion where he is going to find lodgings for the night? It must be getting late; and they can't go wandering about the country in the dark, searching for a public-house and a stable."

So therewithal the young man rose and went outside. But he had not been gone a second when he returned.

"If you will come out now," he said, "you will see the most surprisingly beautiful thing you ever saw in your life, I believe. And you needn't wrap up," he considerably added to the womenfolk; "the air is quite soft and mild."

Nevertheless, they lingered for a moment to put some slight shawl or kerchief round their head or shoulders; and then they passed out from the saloon on to the piece of deck at the prow. And, indeed, it was no wonder they were struck wholly silent by the marvellous scene they now found all around them. In the cloudless violet-hued heavens there shone a full golden moon; jet-black were the trees and bushes near us, and also the shadow along the bank; but the surface of the canal, away behind us, was of a pale and mystic grey; and that, again, was broken by the divergent ripples we left in our wake, each of these ripples catching the moonlight and becoming a line of quivering fire. This boat, indeed, stealing through the silence and the mysterious dusk, seemed like some great white moth, with long and sinuous wings of silver; and the creature had red eyes, too—for the windows were lit; and noiselessly it crept on beneath the black overhanging boughs. The whole thing was very ghostly; it sounded quite pleasant to hear the cheerful voice of Captain Columbus—whom we could scarcely make out in the shadow of the trees—return assurances that he knew perfectly well where he was, and would soon bring us to our moorings for the night.

Nevertheless, it was some little time thereafter before we were finally made fast, and saw the dark figures of the two men and the horse disappear along the grey tow-path, leaving us to the silence of this perfect moonlight night. As to where we were we had not the faintest notion ; nor did it matter one jot. Jack Duncombe and the writer of these pages considered they might profitably smoke their final cigar outside, and Queen Tita and Miss Peggy, the latter with her banjo, were so kind as to come and sit in the stern-sheets with us.

"On a night like this," said our young American friend, "isn't it a pity we haven't some beautiful music? The tinkling of a banjo spoils everything."

"Peggy," said Queen Tita, putting her hand on the girl's arm for a moment, "sing 'My old Kentucky home.'"

Thereupon Miss Peggy—who is the soul of good-nature when there is no mischievous project in her head—took up her banjo, and began to sing, and very well did her rich contralto voice sound in the stillness of these slumbering woods and fields. One could not help wondering what some belated rustic would have thought of it all if he had

chanced upon us on his way home : the black trees and the grey canal showing no sign of life ; that spectral white thing moored in there among the willows, with its motionless points of red-fire ; the silence all around absolute but for the strange singing of a woman's voice.

Well, it was a pleasant night ; and I don't know how late we sat up, or did not sit up. We felt very much alone, and yet, somehow or other, we were not greatly discontented with our solitude.

CHAPTER IX.

“ Marie Hamilton to the Kirk is gane,
Wi’ ribbons on her breist :
The King thocht mair o’ Marie Hamilton
Than he listened to the priest.

“ Marie Hamilton to the Kirk is gane,
Wi’ ribbons in her hair :
The King thocht mair o’ Marie Hamilton
Than onie that were there.

“ Marie Hamilton to the Kirk is gane,
Wi’ gloves upon her hands :
And the King thocht mair o’ Marie Hamilton
Than the Queen and a’ her lands.”

It was hard that such a perfect night should be succeeded by a wild and blustering morning ; the rain was rattling on our house-roof ; there was a wail of wind through the swaying and dripping bushes and trees. In the midst of all this turmoil, Captain Columbus suddenly makes his appearance, emerging from the

vague regions of unknown space; and, with serious aspect, he informs us that we cannot go any further at present. The authorities, it appears, lock the canal-gates every second Sunday—perhaps with a view of forcing on the floating population at least a chance of going to church: and it is this second Sunday we happen to have hit on. Queen Tita, of course, is far from being disappointed. She highly approves of stopping the traffic every second Sunday; and doubtless would have the regulation extended to every Sunday, if she had the power. And as for our own nondescript crew, she distinctly objects to having them labour on the day of rest.

“I quite agree with you,” says Jack Duncombe (he generally does agree with her, for reasons of his own). “The seventh day’s rest is good for everybody all round. I remember, one night at dinner, a young parson was going on about the necessity of Sunday as an institution, and one of the girls of the house said, ‘Yes, of course; if it wasn’t for Sunday, how should we ever find the missing tennis-balls?’ But I wonder what we are to do here?”

“Can’t we go to church?” says Miss Peggy, ingenuously. “If we were to find a

road, and keep to it, we should be sure to come to a church somewhere."

It turned out, however, that this search for a simple rustic service did not seem to commend itself to Mrs. Threepenny-bit, whose sympathies rather incline to cathedral aisles, and mystic-hued windows, and the hushed, clear singing of an invisible choir: besides which, she detests, as a cat would, walking along muddy roads. Indeed, we had just begun to think of settling down to a hopelessly idle day, when Captain Columbus again presented himself, and with far more alarming news—in fact, he had become a kind of stormy petrel on this wild morning. The latest piece of intelligence was that the local experts (where did he find any in this solitary district?) were of opinion that it was quite impracticable for us to get our boat under a certain small bridge a little way further along. Of course this was a contingency to be faced, and at once. If the information was correct, it meant our immediate return to Oxford, and a stay there of probably a week, while the Nameless Barge was having two or three inches taken off the height of her house. Accordingly, orders were given that, without waiting to send for the horse, they should

themselves haul the boat along to this alleged obstruction, that we might know our fate forthwith.

In a venerable book of jests, the title of which the present writer has forgotten, there is a story told of a Dutch toll-keeper who dreamed a dream of the Day of Judgment, himself and his neighbours being summoned to give an account of themselves, and then being sent to the left hand among the goats, or to the right hand among the sheep, as their merits deserved. Several of his fellow toll-keepers having been sent among the goats for their iniquitous exactions, Jacob Schmæven, somewhat after this fashion, relates what happened to himself: "Then the Lord said to me, 'Stand before me, Schmæven. Schmæven, you take too much toll.' 'Yes, Lord,' I said, 'I take too much toll—but from the rich people only, and not from the poor.' Then the Lord said, 'Friend Schmæven, you may go to the right hand among the sheep—but let me tell you it is a tam tight squeeze!'" We found the phrase most appositely descriptive of our passage under this wretched little bridge. Such pushing, and hauling, and canting, and righting there was!—and all the while flying showers were driving past; the wind was

whistling through the trees, and drawing out the branches of the willows like long streamers of witches' hair ; and the silver-grey breadths of water in the meadows were darkened to a leaden hue as the successive gusts bore heavily down upon them. But through the bridge we eventually did get ; and, as further progress was impossible for that day, we allowed Captain Columbus and the Horse-Marine to go back to Oxford, if they should be lucky enough to strike a railway station somewhere ; and when they were gone away—having been intrusted by Murdoch with sundry commissions, chiefly on account of breakage—we were once more left to ourselves in this remote and rain-beaten region.

Suddenly, through the chaos of sounds without, there came another—the faint and distant tolling of a bell. Miss Peggy quickly looked up from her writing.

“ Mr. Duncombe, there must be a church somewhere not so far away. Don't you think we could find it ? ”

“ Certainly,” said he, with the greatest alacrity—for these two had never had an excursion together before. “ If you will put on thick boots and a waterproof, I will undertake to find out where the church is.”

"In a moment, then, when I have finished my letter," said she; and presently she had gone away to get ready.

And then the extraordinary care that had to be taken of her, and the precautions, and the anxious advice, when she returned to the saloon! You would have thought she was made of Venetian spun glass, or Genoese pastry, or Sèvres china, by the way he went on. Was she quite sure that her boots were thick-soled? Her waterproof ought certainly to have been three inches longer: wouldn't she try whether she could wear his, and he would take his ulster? Well, if she didn't care to do that, hadn't she some smaller bonnet that would allow the hood to come well over, so as to be strapped down round her ears? At the next big town we should reach, he said, he would get her a deer-stalker's cap, and show her how admirably that fitted into the hood of a waterproof, to keep the wind from whistling about her head. Would she entrust him with a spare pair of gloves, that he could give her on reaching the church porch, and then her hands wouldn't feel damp and miserable during the service? To one of us it appeared pretty certain that this was not the first time Mr. Jack Duncombe had minis-

tered to a young lady's comfort ; but anyhow Miss Peggy was apparently very grateful to him—though once or twice there was a look in her eyes that seemed to say she was a little bit amused by his assiduous care of her. Then these two set forth from the ark to see whether they could find any resting place for the soles of their feet.

While our young friends were away, the loneliness of our situation was naturally intensified ; our sole companions were the speedwells and daisies and forget-me-nots along the bank, and the swaying willows and flooded meadows beyond. Oddly enough, though the weather brightened up from time to time, there was not a bird singing anywhere ; whereas, along the Thames, whenever a shower ceased, there was a burst of music filling all the air. In what various functions of reading and letter-writing we passed that morning needs not to be described ; but when at length we heard voices without, and presently beheld Miss Peggy's bright and smiling face at the door of the saloon, it cannot truthfully be said that the interruption was unwelcome.

She had come back in excellent spirits, after the buffeting the rain and wind had

given her; and all during luncheon she was very talkative and merry, while her eyes were sometimes quicker than her words in flashing out her meaning, or showing that she was alive to everything that was going on, whether in jest or earnest. It was the first time she had been in a small village church in this country.

"For one thing," she said, "I am glad to find that the Horse-Marine wasn't making fun of me yesterday. I was watching what they were doing on the bank; and he was talking to Columbus; and he said something about going 'right back into the ta-own.' Well, I thought it wasn't very civil of him to mock my Yankee pronunciation before my very face; and I said to myself that I would have it out with the young man before he was many days older. But this morning in church I found I had been mistaken. I heard the children in the choir say as plainly as possible—'Glory be to the Father, and ta-o the Son'; and I came to the conclusion that the Horse-Marine hadn't been mocking me at all."

"Of course he hadn't," one says to her. "If only you keep your ears open you'll hear plenty of American pronunciation and plenty of what are called Americanisms as you go

through these country districts. Perhaps you didn't notice how Columbus greeted his acquaintances on the barges last night?—'How do?' he said to each one of them. And as we were coming away from the lock, when he nodded good-bye to a friend he had been talking to, he said, 'So long!' Both of these are supposed to be Americanisms, aren't they?"

"It's very hard," says Peggy, reflectively, "that I am not allowed to use the least little bit of American slang—it is so clever sometimes, and means such a lot. Any English girl I meet may use those smart little phrases, when she is among her own friends, and everybody understands she only does it for fun——"

"And why may not you?"

"Because if I did, people would say American girls ordinarily talked like that."

"People would say? What people?"

"The English people," answers Miss Peggy, simply.

"You may believe this, that the English people are no such microcephalous jackasses. Why, our Bell is quite delighted when she gets hold of another Western-ism; but of course that is amongst ourselves: she doesn't

trumpet her newly-acquired knowledge from the housetops."

All the same Miss Peggy shakes her head.

"People are so stupid," she says; "and I have the credit of my country to keep up."

"Then please don't consider us as people," one says to her finally; "and talk in any way you like so long as you are on board this boat. It isn't in neighbourhoods like this, surely, that you need be afraid of what people will say!"

In wet weather, and during the day-time, we had agreed that there should be no smoking in the saloon; so presently two of us found ourselves outside, in the stern-sheets, where there was some kind of shelter from the driving wind and drizzle.

"Do you know, that is a remarkably nice girl!" says our young dramatist, with sudden emphasis, as soon as we are shut out of hearing.

"Indeed!"

"She is, really. She has been telling me all about herself this morning, and about her family; and I seem to know the whole lot, and all her surroundings. Of course, on a boating expedition of this kind you get to understand people so much better. A single

day's constant companionship makes you better acquainted than a hundred chance meetings during a London season——”

“Yes. I have heard young people say that before, on board a yacht. It was generally when the girl was good-looking that this intimate acquaintance was insisted on.”

“Oh, it isn't only that she is pretty,” observes the young man, ingenuously. “I call her uncommonly clever. She isn't a fool, by any means. Oh, no. I tell you, you have to be on your guard; she knows more than you think.”

‘She knows more about *you* than you think,’ is one's inward comment; but our young friend continues—

“She puzzled me this morning, though, for a bit. You remember she was writing a letter before we went out.”

“I believe she was.”

“Well, as we were going along, she asked me if we were likely to come across a post-office. I said I didn't know; but that at any rate we could get the letter posted for her to-morrow morning. She said that wouldn't do at all; she must post it herself; it was a compact she had made before leaving America that she should write every Sunday, and post

the letter with her own hand. Of course, I jumped to the natural conclusion. Indeed, I reflected that a bright and attractive girl like that was sure to be engaged—though I had never heard any of you speak of it. I can't say that I was particularly disappointed: it was none of my business; still, you know, you rather prefer to fancy that the girl you're talking to is quite heart-whole."

"Is that so?"

"Oh, yes; you don't want to imagine that all the time she is listening to you she is in reality thinking of some beast of a man somewhere else. However, it was no business of mine; no; I rather hoped she would tell me something about him, as she had been telling me so much about her people. Fact is, I looked upon myself as rather a generous and noble-hearted personage—resolved to find out a post-office so that a letter might be sent away to some idiot of a fellow in New York. But, after all, it was for her sister."

"Really!"

"Yes. Her sister Emily. She's at school at Brooklyn. She is only fourteen; but tall for her age; and these two are great chums; and when Miss Rosslyn left America, each of them promised to write to the other every

Sunday, and post the letter with her own hand——”

“No matter whether the post-offices were open or not.”

“Oh, I got the people to take it—I managed that,” says the young man, complacently; then he continues his garrulous talk, all upon one subject: “I wonder if her own countrymen would quite like to hear the way she speaks about England and the people over here. She is not ungrateful for kindness, that is one thing certain; and she doesn’t conceal her opinion about the exalted merits and virtues of her friends. And isn’t she frank, too, about the circumstances of her family? Well, she found that I knew part of her story before, and so she spoke freely enough. I rather fancy her father may have kept her abroad all this while in order to see whether he couldn’t pull round a little, and make it easier for her to bear the change when she goes back. Not that it would matter much to her, judging by the way she talks; she is very sensible about it; and you can see how simply and inexpensively she dresses, though she is always particularly neat. Just imagine the situation of those two partners out there—companions from boyhood

almost, and then associated in business most of their lives; and suddenly the one is beggared, while the other remains a man of wealth. Fortunately, from what I can gather, the collapse of Mr. Rosslyn's speculations hasn't affected the credit of the firm; the other partner is known to be a solid man; so that the Rosslyn family should, in course of time, get fairly right again, if they can't be as rich as they were. I don't know why she should have told me so much—well, I was asking her, if she was so fond of England, why she didn't stay here altogether, and then she began and told me how they were all situated at home, when once she discovered that I had got most of the story from you."

"You must have employed your time diligently, both going and coming."

"We did not hurry back, you know."

"You did not. You kept luncheon half an hour late."

"Well, she is really a very interesting girl," he says, by way of apology.

"As an ethnological curiosity, yes. I understood your interest in her to be purely scientific. Have you discovered any racial peculiarities yet?"

"I believe the wet weather has got at

my cigars ; this is a perfect brute," he says, knitting his brows. " Oh, as to the probable origin of her family ? Well, that is of little consequence. The girl herself is sufficiently attractive—when you get to understand how she is situated—and how she regards things, and her opinions, and so forth—— "

" What kind of a clergyman did you find there this morning ? "

" Oh, the usual kind. Her sister Emily is extraordinarily fond of her, and will hardly let any of the others go near her when she is at home. It is the Emily one who is considered to be the beauty of the family ; so I suppose she must be something to look at, rather ! "

" Do you think Miss Rosslyn so pretty, then ? "

" Why, don't you ? " he says, with an innocent air of surprise.

" That is neither here nor there. Did you have a good sermon this morning ? "

" Yes, good enough, I dare say. You know Miss Rosslyn's waterproof isn't as efficient as it ought to be ; and all we could do we couldn't get the hood to keep properly up. The consequence was that she got her hair pretty well wet and blown about ; and although

she stopped in the porch and tried to dry it a little with her handkerchief, it was considerably bedraggled as she was sitting in the pew. And, do you know, it really looked prettier than ever; there were dark and light strands in it—some almost golden, and some a beautiful brown: really, it was quite pretty to look at."

"You seem to have been much edified by this morning's service," one remarks, in a casual kind of way.

"But, I say," continues young Shakespeare, "you don't actually mean that there is a chance of that pretentious prig, A'Becket, coming along? He isn't a friend of yours, is he?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Then why should he tack himself on to a small private party, such as we make at present?" demands the young man, rather indignantly.

"Why? Well, when you are introduced to anyone at a friend's house, and he chooses to make himself agreeable to the women of your party, and proposes to favour them with a visit, what are you to do? That is their look-out. And, besides, they can't very well say 'Not at home' if he comes along a canal-

bank and finds them in a boat. They will have to be civil to him. Perhaps their youthful minds are impressed by the fame of so great a man——”

“A great man! I consider him as bad a specimen as I ever saw of the pedantic and conceited schoolmaster! And then he is so hideously ugly!”

“But don’t you think there is something pathetic in the worship of beauty when you find that devotion in a rather ill-favoured person? Don’t you think that our guest of this evening——”

“He isn’t really coming, is he?”

“He said he would try to find us out. And don’t you think that, by way of compensation for Nature having given him an unwholesome complexion and green eyes, don’t you think he should be allowed a few minutes’ worship at the shrine? Suppose that he, too, should find the strands of gold and brown in Miss Peggy’s hair rather pretty?”

“Well,” says the young man, somewhat gloomily, “it is not for me to say anything, because I am here merely as an invited guest, as he will be if he comes this evening. But I can’t help thinking it considerably cheeky of a stranger, or semi-stranger, to thrust himself

on a party away on an expedition of this kind."

"To cheer our loneliness, my young friend!"

"He might know we would rather be by ourselves."

"You may be of that opinion; and so may I; but women may be glad of a little gaiety—a little alien admiration even——"

"Gaiety! His ugly mug would turn beer sour!" exclaims this impetuous boy.

Well, it began to clear up in the afternoon, and soon the word was passed round to prepare for an exploration of this neighbourhood in which we had been held captive. And perhaps it was as a make-up for the possible interference of the Scholiast in the evening that Jack Duncombe now assumed sole charge and management of Miss Rosslyn; and our pretty Miss Peggy received these little attentions with much gracious complaisance. Moreover, as these two had discovered a church in the morning, they were allowed to lead the way; and in the warmer light now beginning to stream over from the west, we patiently followed them along the canal-bank, and into a pathway through some fields, until we actually came in sight of a

house—a farm-house it was—and near it was a little church, and also a parsonage, and similar evidences that there were people in the world besides ourselves. But we could see no one to tell us the name of the place ; nor do we know it until this day. A winding and miry lane took us back to the canal, which, with its wooded banks and rows of poplars, looked quite river-like ; and as the walking here was preferable to that of the country roads, we held on our way, with the westering light growing ever more and more golden, and gleaming on the scarcely-stirring, wet foliage all around. And still these two kept on ahead ; and, indeed, we were paying but little attention to them—talking as we were on this calm evening of distant friends ; until Mrs. Threepenny-bit, happening to glance forward, laughed a little.

“ Mr. Duncombe’s devotion,” she said, “ is becoming quite remarkable. One would almost think it was serious. Of course, it can’t be serious, because—well, because they don’t know each other at all—— ”

“ Oh ! don’t they ? I assure you they know each other very well indeed,” one answers, “ if his confidences have been like hers. Oh, yes ; it is wonderful how intimate you may

become with a young lady if you are interested about herself and her family, and if you have a memory for details. Emily is only fourteen, it is true ; but she is tall for her age, and she and Miss Rosslyn are great companions. Emily is at school in Brooklyn. Emily writes to her sister, and her sister writes to her, every Sunday ; and the letter is to be posted by the writer's own hand. Emily is so fond of her sister she will hardly let the others go near her when she is at home. Miss Rosslyn's hair got wet to-day, and she tried to dry it in the porch, but couldn't entirely, and it looked very pretty as she was sitting in the pew. Miss Rosslyn is grateful for kindness. Miss Rosslyn likes the people she has met over here. If Miss Rosslyn's opinion of England and the English were known on the other side, America would howl with rage, and rend the stars and stripes, and sit in sack-cloth and ashes. Miss Rosslyn is quite frank about her circumstances, and has the merit of dressing inexpensively——”

“ You seem to have heard a good deal about Peggy to-day.”

“ I had a fair dose.”

“ Of course the subject wasn't interesting to *you*.”

“Madam, all human beings are interesting to me.”

“Yes; but you prefer to study those that have pretty eyes, and that will go away with you for long walks along the shore when everybody else on board the yacht is busy packing.”

“I don’t know to whom you are referring——”

“I should think not; the list is too long.”

“And I don’t remember the circumstances; but I can perceive that there may have been an occasion on which considerate people kept themselves out of the way so as to let others get forward with their business.”

“And the considerate people—what was their business? English history, I suppose! Well,” she adds, with another glance at the couple ahead of us, and with an odd smile on her face, “if Mr. Duncombe is only amusing himself with Peggy, he’d better look out. Of course it doesn’t matter to her whether he is serious or not; she can always have plenty of suitors—if she is so foolish as to think of marrying; but if he fancies that he can make-believe without Peggy seeing through it all, it’s little he understands about her. If

he doesn't mind, Mr. Duncombe will get *what for*, as your friends in Scotland say."

"You want to know whether he is serious? I'm sure I can't tell you. But I hope we shall hear no more about Emily; for although she is only fourteen, and tall for her age, and writes every Sunday, one doesn't seem to be deeply concerned about her."

"Why, I have got Emily's portrait at home—Peggy gave it to me ever so long ago!" she says; for no earthly reason but to place herself, as regards Peggy, on a footing superior to that of the young man, who only heard of the brat of a school-girl this very morning.

To think we should have been looking on England as rather a sparsely-populated country! Why, we had three visitors that evening! Two of them, whom we found on the bank when we returned to the boat, were of rustic mould, and in stolid silence, and with calm immovable gaze they contemplated the strange object that had invaded these solitudes. They made no remark; their eyes wandered not; they merely stood there and stared, and stared, and stared, as fished the famous fisher of Sunburie. And perhaps it was to prevent their being hopelessly mesmerised that young

Duncombe now proceeded to act in a way quite sufficient to arouse anybody's attention—in fact, we ourselves began to wonder whether he had suddenly grown insane. During the latter part of our afternoon stroll he had been looking everywhere about for a big stone; and, having found one, he brought it along to the boat. Now, with a dark resolve visible on his face, he attached a piece of cord to the stone; and then he went into the saloon and came out again with a slim volume in his hand, not a word being uttered the while. The volume we recognised as a little monograph on Coleridge that we had seen lying about; but we knew it by its outside only; consequently we were quite unaware that this piece of criticism, or whatever else it might be, was of a nature to awaken rage. Nevertheless, and with a desperate malignity, Jack Duncombe proceeded to tie the harmless little book to the big stone.

"Fancy," we overheard him say, "fancy setting a rat-minded creature like that to balance and measure and estimate the genius of Coleridge! They might as well set a thieves' lawyer to expound the Book of Revelation!"

Forthwith he lifted stone and book together,

and heaved; there was a mighty splash, and a series of widening ripples; then slowly the surface of the water became tranquil again. The two rustics stolidly stared at the spot where the stone had sunk. Then they stared at Jack Duncombe. Then they resumed their staring—at the boat, at the windows, the gunwale, the tiller, the roof, the anchor at the bow. And never a word they spoke. We left them staring.

Our third visitor—to Jack Duncombe's obvious discomfiture—was no other than Mr. Algernon A'Becket, who arrived some little time before dinner, and was in high glee over his success in discovering our whereabouts. Indeed, he was quite hilarious, notwithstanding that his trousers looked rather damp; and as he confessed that after his multifarious adventures of the afternoon he was just a little bit hungry, Murdoch was bidden to make speed, while the women-folk began to light the lamps and candles in order to brighten up the saloon. Jack Duncombe, of course, would take no part in the entertainment of this new guest; but Mr. A'Becket seemed capable of making himself at home without much trouble; and Mrs. Threepenny-bit and her young American friend, as they were

laying the cloth, and otherwise getting matters made easy for Murdoch, were very courteous and complaisant towards him, the while he recounted his victorious triumph over all obstacles and difficulties.

"And how are you to get back, Mr. A'Becket?" his hostess said to him, not unnaturally. "I wish we could offer you a berth——"

"Not at all—not at all!" he answered, with abundant cheerfulness. "I know precisely where I am now——"

"I'm sure that is more than we do," she observed, rather ruefully.

"And you know I was anxious to see how you looked *en voyage*," he continued, with a well-satisfied glance all round; "and really nothing could be more snug and delightful. How strange it must be to feel yourselves so entirely isolated—a small party all by yourselves, and wandering away into these out-of-the-world places—really, it makes one a little envious."

Jack Duncombe glared: was the man actually begging for an invitation?

And at dinner, too, Mr. A'Becket seemed quite content so long as he could address himself to the two women, Jack Duncombe rarely

interfering, except when there was a chance of his posing as Miss Peggy's natural ally and champion. Indeed, the younger man strove to appear in that light whenever occasion offered; and seemed ready to sacrifice the most sacred institutions of his native land for the mere sake of taking her part. For example, our Oxford friend was talking about the irreverence for antiquity commonly attributed to the American people (there was not much of that quality about Peggy, anyway); and said he had once heard an American declare that Squattersville, Nebraska, was of more value to the world than Westminster Abbey; because Squattersville was full of living men, whereas Westminster Abbey was full of dead ones. Whereupon, Miss Peggy said—sensibly and modestly enough, as we thought,

“Well, sometimes our people at home say things like that, but they don't believe them. They think it clever to startle you, that is all. If a man were seriously to say anything of that kind in a company of educated Americans, he would be looked on as if he were a baboon escaped from a cage.”

That ought to have been enough. But it

wasn't enough for Jack Duncombe. Oh, dear, no. Something must be said on behalf of Miss Peggy's countrymen. Miss Peggy herself was not to be crushed by the dread might and majesty of Westminster Abbey.

"After all," said this reckless young man, "if you walk through Westminster Abbey, and impartially look at the names of the people they have put there, you'll come to the conclusion that in former days it was pretty easy to get in. They must have been hard put to it to get a fair show of distinguished men, for the number of nobodies and duffers is perfectly awful. Look at John Philips. Did you ever hear of John Philips?"

Our learned friend from Oxford, being thus directly challenged, had to confess his ignorance of the enshrined John Philips.

"Well, he was a writer of comic verses—at least, I believe they are considered to be comic," the younger man continued, with superfluous scorn. "I know this—I could get you twenty living writers who could do infinitely better verses: indeed, if John Philips were alive now, there is one place where you would *not* find him, and that is at the *Punch* weekly dinner."

Mr. A'Becket turned to Miss Peggy, and said to her, with a smile,

"Your countryman whom I heard make that remark is said to be worth thirty million dollars."

"He isn't worth consideration," she answered, with a kind of audacious petulance; and there the subject dropped.

Now, nothing but the most despicable jealousy could have refused to admit that our visitor did his very best to make himself amiable and amusing. It is true that he was a little too much given to the formulating of opinions on matters small and great; and that is a weariness to the flesh; but on these opinions he did not insist over much. It was almost pathetic, indeed, to see this person, of cadaverous complexion, and somewhat too obvious front teeth, striving so hard to win, by the display of his intellectual fascinations, a smile from the eyes of Beauty. He succeeded, too. Miss Peggy was very good to him—doubtless merely because he was our guest, and she was bound to be civil. If he had encountered unheard-of perils in his wild pursuit of us, surely now he was reaping his reward. And yet there was a skilful touch of respect in her manner towards him.

She seemed impressed by his authority; even when she was most amused, there was a sort of pleased submission in her look. Of course, before this stranger she was decorum itself. She played the properly-conducted young lady to perfection. One began to fear that she was doing it only too well; and that in the ingenuous mind of Jack Duncombe there might be planted the first baleful seeds of suspicion.

But you should have heard how that young man broke forth when our guest—somewhat reluctantly, as it seemed—had to leave us to find his way across country to some railway-station that he named. You would have thought that this harmless freak on the part of an Oxford Don, instead of being in its way a kind of compliment, was really a gross invasion of one's inalienable natural rights. If we wished to be by ourselves, why should we not be allowed to be by ourselves? Mr. Jack Duncombe made much use of that word "ourselves." He seemed to like it somehow. Throughout his remonstrances there appeared to run the assumption that we four had cut ourselves off from the world, and were to spend a nomadic existence together for the rest of our lives. And then the infuriate

scorn which he dealt out to pedants and their insufferable airs.

"I propose," said he, in his reckless fashion, "that we should give up our leisure time on this trip to the composition of a great and learned work—just to show what we can do. Will you join, Miss Rosslyn?"

"Oh, yes," says the young lady, with calm effrontery. "What is it to be about?"

"Oh, anything will serve to show off with. We must make it imposing. The square of the Hypothenuse, if you like."

"That would be very interesting," she observes, with much complacency. "Of course you will begin with a description of the square—I mean the square in which the Hypothenuse lives?"

"Certainly," he answers, "catching on" with alacrity. "Then we come to the habits of the Hypothenuse—his time of getting up and going into the city."

"I would have something more romantic than that," Miss Peggy says, thoughtfully. "If he lives in a square, there must be people opposite. One of them might be a young lady——"

"Yes, undoubtedly; but she is rather an unknown quantity yet—we will call her *x*

until we can settle more about her. She is living with her Uncle Rhomboid——”

“And the Hypothenuse has the greatest difficulty in meeting with her,” she continues.

“The gardens in the square would be a good place: I suppose the Hypothenuse would have a key?”

“Naturally. But then again Aunt Parallelogram distinctly approves of the match; and is going to leave all her money to *x*. Would you make the Hypothenuse rich or poor?”

So these two young idiots went on; one of them apparently taking a grim delight in thus revenging himself (as he considered) for the intrusion of a stranger among “ourselves.” There was no other thought for the hapless Scholiast making his way along darkened roads to wait for the last train in some solitary little railway-station. Here the lights were burning clear; and there were cigars and things; and these light-hearted young folk knew they were now safe from all interference: with aimless merriment, and bandied words, and laughing glances to fill full every glad and precious minute. Moreover, tomorrow we should resume our voyage, and be off into the unknown. It was all very

well for this prying collegian to ferret us out when we were within measurable distance of Oxford town; but soon we should be away in remoter wilds, with all communications cut, except such as we chose should remain open. And where would the long-coated metaphysician be then? Jack Duncombe and his bright-eyed neighbour eagerly followed up this subject of the Hypothenuse; and turned it outside, and inside, and topsyturvy; until they had got a quite blood-curdling series of adventures to relate; and all the while Miss Peggy's smiling looks and dimpled cheek seemed to show that she was enjoying this careless gaiety, after the constraint and propriety conduct of the previous part of the evening; and the young man who was her aider and abettor in the rambling nonsense made no secret of his satisfaction that we were once more entirely "by ourselves."

CHAPTER X.

“Within the sand of what far river lies
The gold that gleams in tresses of my Love?
What highest circle of the heavens above
Is jewelled with such stars as are her eyes?
And where is the rich sea whose coral vies
With her red lips, that cannot kiss enough?
What dawn-lit garden knew the rose, whereof
The fled soul lives in her cheeks’ rosy guise?”

“WELL, I declare!” exclaims Mrs. Three-penny-bit, in accents of only half-smothered indignation, as she comes into the saloon at an early hour. “In all my life I never knew such weather! The tourists talk about the rain in the West Highlands! The West Highlands don’t know how to rain; they should come here to take a lesson. And just as we are about to get to such interesting places! Captain Columbus told me yesterday that we should almost certainly get to Warwick to-morrow night. But I suppose the

whole district that used to be the Forest of Arden will be flooded—I wonder how Rosalind, and Celia, and Touchstone would have liked *that*. And I hoped we should be able to see the ruins of Kenilworth by moonlight. Moonlight, indeed! We needn't expect to find the ghost of poor Amy Robsart wandering about in weather like this."

Here Murdoch enters.

"Murdoch, don't you wish you were back in the Highlands to get a glimpse of the sun again?"

Murdoch looks puzzled.

"Yes, Mem; I think there's another shower coming over."

"Another shower coming over! It is raining as hard as ever it knows how."

"Oh, yes; it iss a pad country, this, for rain—a ferry pad country for rain, Mem. I wass thinking I neffer pefore sah so mich land under watter."

Here Miss Rosslyn enters.

"Peggy, if I write a history of this trip, I will call it 'A Voyage in Waterproofs.'"

"Well," says Miss Peggy, with her wonted cheerfulness, "what better could we do than devote such a day to literature? I'm going to write a novel——"

"With the Hypothenuse for hero?" Jack Duncombe suggests.

"Oh, no; something very serious indeed. You'll see. Just wait until Murdoch has cleared the table after breakfast; and then I will make a beginning that will show you something."

However, when Murdoch had cleared the table, it appeared that it was required for another purpose: Mrs. Threepenny-bit wanted to do up her flowers for the day—including the roses presented by Mr. A'Becket; and soon she had the cloth removed, and was busily at work. Peggy went and got her banjo. First she played, in a careless way, some plantation dance or other of which we did not know the name. Then, in almost an undertone, she sang—

Mary had a little lamp
Filled full of kerosene;
She went with it to light the fire
And has not since benzine.

Suddenly, at the conclusion of these touching words, there was a simultaneous roar of a chorus—

Then carry me back to Tennessee,
There let me live and die.

She sang "How doth the little busy bee";

she sang "Ye banks and braes"; she sang "Sylvia hath a beaming eye," or any other thing that could be suggested to her; and ever the recurrent and stormy chorus was volunteered her at the end of each verse. Jack Duncombe caught up the air at once, and joined in with a will. It was his initiation into the art and practice of madness as an antidote against despair and rage and rain. Nay, he himself made random shots at verses to suit; and was anxious to relieve Miss Rosslyn from the duty of singing the solo. But at last she laid aside the banjo.

"Really, this is mere frivolity," she said, with a pre-occupied air. "I must set about my novel, even if I can't have the table."

She went to the ladies' cabin and returned with a tiny writing-desk, which she proceeded to balance on her knee as she sat sideways on her seat. Then we could perceive that she was engaged in the agony of composition. Biting the end of her pencil seemed to help her a little. Her brows were knitted; her face was grave; and yet one could half fancy that there was mischief in her downcast eyes.

"Come, Miss Peggy," one says to her, "let's hear what start you have made."

"Oh, don't interrupt; you have no idea how horribly difficult it is. I want something bold and thrilling for a beginning—something that will arrest the attention of the critics."

"If you write for the critics you won't come to much good," says Jack Duncombe, who rarely fails to have his fling when the chance is given him. "I have been thinking of addressing a letter to M. Pasteur, asking him if he couldn't inoculate one against the effects of criticism. He might render you safe from the bites of the rabid beasts."

"How *am* I to get on, if you interrupt?" complains Miss Peggy; but there is not much anger in her petulance.

"Peggy," says Mrs. Threepenny-bit, "do you always put out the tip of your tongue while you are writing?"

"Only when I am writing a novel," she answers placidly.

"Is it at your readers, or at your critics, or at your companions?"

Miss Peggy does not look up.

"That's telling. I put out my tongue."

"Oh, I suppose you think we are in one of the streets of Verona!" says Mrs. Threepenny-bit, with some vague recollection of a Montague and Capulet quarrel.

Here, however, Miss Peggy not only raises her eyes, she also puts aside her writing-desk, and gets up. She edges towards the door and opens it. Her glance is fixed upon her hostess; and it is full of malice; perhaps she is annoyed by these unseemly interruptions.

“Oh, no,” she says, retreating still further, “we’re not in Verona at all. Verona house-boat in the middle of England.”

In a twinkling she disappears; and the same instant a sponge surcharged with water strikes the edge of the door, just where her saucy face had been. It was a very good aim for a woman: had Mrs. Threepenny-bit been the thirtieth part of a second quicker, that impertinent hussy would have met with the punishment she richly deserved. Then we made bold to take up the sheet of paper on which Miss Peggy had pencilled the opening lines of her novel. Thus they ran:—“*It was a cold day in New York—a cold, cold winter’s day. In the chill easterly blast the brown-stone buildings had turned to a livid purple; and the veins in the marble blocks ran blue. Not a single statue in Central Park had a nose or a toe left; all had dropped off, frost-bitten by the terrible wind.*”

“Ah, there is no sentiment among the

young people of these days," says Queen Tita, as she sprinkles the roses with her wet fingers. "When I was at school, the girls used often to try to write stories; but they were always full of noble people and beautiful aspirations. Now-a-days, there is nothing but burlesque. That wretch has been simply making a fool of us."

At this moment Miss Peggy reappears.

"Come along—come along, everybody," she says briskly. "The morning is clearing up beautifully; I believe it is going to be quite fine. And Captain Columbus is here; and he has brought a whole multitude of people with him—two men and a boy at the very least; and they have a barrow; and he wants to know if he can come into the saloon to lift the flooring. There is quite a commotion outside."

This was stirring news indeed, after the silence and inactivity of these last four-and-twenty hours; and forthwith we swarmed out, to greet the reappearance of our crew. We found Columbus in the midst of this vast concourse; and a busy and important man was he; for he had already purchased three hundredweight of old iron, and was now bargaining for a fourth. It turned out that

there was another bridge, not far ahead, that was likely to trouble us; and our gallant skipper, with a foresight and a resolution reminding us of the qualities that enabled his great namesake to discover a new world, had determined to reduce the height of the boat by cramming in a lot more of ballast. Strange ballast it was, when we came to examine it. Apparently, it was refuse from some railway factory; there were all kinds of bolts, and screws, and rivets, and nuts, and bits of rail; and, as Columbus proceeded to tear up the flooring of the saloon, and to wedge in this old iron alongside the other ballast, one began to wonder what would happen supposing that the Nameless Barge were to be sunk somewhere—in the Severn, for example—and lie imbedded there for “an eternity or two.” What would the new race of mortals, with their aerial navigation, make of these strange fragments? Would they recognise them as belonging to the half-mythic railway age? And perhaps a few ribs and planks of our noble vessel might remain, to offer materials for all kinds of conjecture? Well; they might be able to reconstruct the Nameless Barge, perhaps; but they were not likely to figure out in their imagination that it ever

contained a creature so perverse, and wilful, and bewildering, and demure, and generally dangerous and demoniacal as our Peggy. She was talking to Captain Columbus now with an air of innocent curiosity on her face that would have deceived her own mother. And Captain Columbus—who had that morning bought for himself in Oxford a straw hat, and a brilliant blue necktie, and made himself very smart indeed—was excessively proud and pleased that the young lady should be so interested in his work, and became quite communicative about boats, and bridges, and tunnels, and what not. Miss Peggy listened with a grave attention. It is always a pleasing sight to see a young mind engaged in the acquisition of knowledge.

Glad enough were we to find ourselves once more in motion; and as we stole quietly on through this unknown region, the skies were banking themselves up into April-looking masses of silver grey and purple grey, while bursts of vivid sunlight chased each other across the richly-wooded landscape. But our literary projects were not altogether abandoned. We returned to the subject of Miss Peggy's novel. She confessed that there was a touch of exaggeration in her description of a cold day

in New York; but she wanted the opening to be effective.

"But your characters, Miss Peggy, what about them? Is it to be a tragedy or a comedy?"

"Oh! I don't know," she says artlessly. "I don't know that there will be much of a story. You know they say that all the stories have been told."

"They say? Who say? Don't you believe any such rubbish. As long as there are two men and a woman in the world—or two women and a man, for that matter—the elemental passions will be there—love, jealousy, hatred, rage, despair, and all the rest of them—and there will be plenty of romantic story to tell, tragic or idyllic as the case may be, if there is anybody capable of telling it. Don't you follow the lead of any literary knife-grinder——"

"But I say," interposes our young Dramatist, "that is rather an awful picture, isn't it? I don't mean the two men and one woman left in the world; that would soon right itself; one of the men would soon be a dead un. But fancy the two women and the one man—just think what his situation would be——"

"Yes," says Queen Tita, "what would you do, supposing you were the man?"

"I?" he answers—and then for a second he pauses, as if the horror of the possibility were too bewildering. "Well, I think this is what I would do. I would go to them and say, 'My dear friends, a very extraordinary thing has happened. If you'll only climb up to the top of these Downs, you will find that the English Channel has gone dry—the water is all away; and if you like you can walk across dry-shod and then go on to Paris, and see if there are any bonnets and parasols left in the shop-windows.' Very likely they wouldn't believe me; but at all events they would be sure to go up to have a look; and then, as soon as I had seen them started, do you know where I should be?—I should be on the main road to the north, running as hard as my legs could carry me; and I shouldn't think myself safe until I had got up to the Moor of Rannoch or somewhere behind Ben Nevis."

"O ye'll take the high road, and I'll take the low road," murmurs Queen Tita as a kind of aside, "'and I'll be in Scotland before ye'——"

"Madam," one says to her, "you'd better go no further with that Loch Lomond song.

The refrain is genuine; the rest of it has 'spurious' written on every line."

"The melody is pretty," she pleads in excuse.

"Undoubtedly. It is simply 'The Bonnie House o' Airlie.'"

"At all events the words are not quite so preposterous as those of 'Allan Percy,'" she says. "I think that is about the worst imitation of a Scotch ballad that I ever met with—and it is of American make, Peggy——"

But Peggy is looking rather stupefied.

"'Allan Percy,'" she says. "Isn't it Scotch? I always thought it was a real Scotch ballad—and very pretty, too——"

"Oh, Peggy!" her friend cries, in accents of deep distress, "don't talk like that. You quite alarm me. If you don't instinctively feel that the words of that wretched thing are as foreign to the whole spirit of Scotch song-writing as they can be—and that the music is just as foreign, too, to the whole spirit of Scotch music—then I am simply frightened to think of the trouble I shall have in teaching you. And of course it's got to be done. But fancy the time! And how am I to begin? Well, perhaps you'd best start with Aytoun's 'Ballads of Scotland'——"

"I know another way," says Miss Peggy.

"And what is that?"

"Take me to Scotland with you," says the young lady, without more ado.

Queen Tita's soft brown eyes smile a quick approval.

"Do you know, Peggy, that is the prettiest speech you have made since you came on board this boat, and the most sensible, too. And I shall consider it a promise."

Very Spring-like indeed was this fresh-blowing morning, with its skies of purple and silver, its sudden bursts of sunlight, and its curiously vivid greens of the rain-washed and rustling foliage. And as the floral decoration of the saloon was now finished, and as Miss Peggy seemed disinclined to resume her literary labours, we had the boat stopped for a second or two, and all of us went ashore for a stroll along the bank, the two women setting out by themselves arm-in-arm. This was a strangely voiceless country through which we were going. There was hardly a sound anywhere; the only living things visible were some Highland cattle, that looked picturesque enough in the lush meadows, though a background of grey rock, green bracken, and crimson heather might have been more appro-

priate. Nevertheless, we knew that there must be some population somewhere in this lonely region; for at one and the same time we could make out the spires of three churches peeping up above the trees: and our gallant captain informed us that these three churches were built by three brothers, who chose the sites so that if any one of them wanted the loan of a hammer it could be thrown to him. It was in this neighbourhood that we came to the bridge about which we had been warned; and well was it that our faithful Columbus had had the forethought to put in the additional four hundredweight of ballast. Even as it was, we had enormous difficulty in getting through; and we began to wonder what the Nameless Barge would be like at the end of our voyage, if she had to encounter much more of this scraping and bumping. But we did get her through—that was the main point; and thereafter left her to her sober gliding through this still landscape, while we continued our careless stroll and talk.

Oddly enough, it was Miss Peggy who formed the chief subject of Mr. Jack Duncombe's conversation on this soft-aired morning; and it was curious to find from how many

points of view that young lady seemed to prove interesting to him. He was looking at her as she walked on ahead with her friend; and he remarked, with something of a critical air—

“I wish Miss Rosslyn was an actress.”

“Indeed; and why?”

“I wish she was an actress; and that I could write a piece for her, in which she should play the heroine. Fancy what a chance that would be for me! That always seems to me the great pull a playwright has over a novelist: whatever the playwright’s heroine may be like, at least the public see that she is alive. All that he has to do is to invent situations for her, and give her words to speak. She is alive; and the public see for themselves what she is. In a novel it is only a description of the person that is there; and it must be horribly difficult to get that life-like.”

“Not at all; anybody can do it.”

“Why, this very morning I was trying to think what I should do if I wanted to describe Miss Rosslyn in a book; and I couldn’t in the least see how it was to be done. Even her appearance,” he continues, looking once more in that critical fashion at the young lady

ahead of us, "even her appearance would come down to a mere catalogue that wouldn't tell you much, would it? You see, if she came on the stage, then everyone would recognize the symmetry of her figure, and—and—the kind of graceful way she moves—and the animation—the intelligence—of her face. But in a book, what are you to do?"

"What, indeed!"

"I was trying, just for fun, you know——"

"To describe Miss Peggy?"

"No, not exactly; but I was wondering, if I should attempt to write a story, how I should begin to describe the heroine."

"And, naturally, you took Miss Peggy for your heroine. Very well; did you succeed?"

"Of course I did not put anything down in writing; I was merely looking at her from time to time, and thinking," says the young man, with much modesty. "Well, you know, there are certain things you could definitely name. You might say she had beautiful hair."

"You might—especially when it gets blown about by wind and rain on her way to church."

"Golden-brown, I should call it; and a little wavy here and there; that is something you could definitely say. Then her forehead—you

might call her forehead intelligent?" he suggests, with a trifle of timidity.

"You might—but it wouldn't convey very much."

"That's just where it is! That's just the difficulty. Of course you have noticed what a beautifully-shaped nostril she has?"

"In a general way, perhaps."

"But that would sound absurd in a book! Of course you might do what the poets do—bring in all kinds of things as similes—you might give her cherry lips, and rose-petal cheeks, and speedwell-blue eyes, and all the rest of it; but that wouldn't be Miss Rosslyn."

"No?"

"It's all very well to say that her cheek is like the petal of a rose; but that tells you nothing about the curious little dimple that appears there when she has been saying something very audacious to your wife, in a perfectly grave voice, and with her eyes cast down. No," he adds, almost with a touch of vexation, "I don't believe the minutest catalogue that could be made of her features would be of any use at all—no matter how true it might be. There's a—a something—about her expression that makes Miss Rosslyn Miss Rosslyn, and unlike any other girl I

ever saw. Perhaps it is her eyes?" he says suddenly.

"It may be her eyes."

"There is a sort of submission in them when she looks at you—as if—well, as though they might very readily laugh at you, only that her natural courtesy keeps them serious. It is a very curious look."

"Yes?"

"And then there is a kind of harmony of expression in her face—I mean—well, when she laughs ever so little, her eyes and her lips and the dimple in her cheeks seem to brighten up all together—I don't quite know how to describe it—but I'm sure you couldn't put it into a book. Perhaps it is that there is so much life in her face; and you can't describe life, you know; it is an intangible, invisible, unknown thing; and yet there is plenty of it in Miss Rosslyn's face."

"Really."

"If you were putting her into a book, now, how would you describe her?" this remarkably cool person proceeds.

"Oh, I wouldn't try. As you say, it might be too difficult. Besides, she might not interest me as she interests you."

"You don't think her interesting?" he says,

surprised into some brief expression of disappointment.

"In a way, perhaps. She seems a nice kind of creature—if she wouldn't make puns."

"Well, now," he says warmly, "I am delighted to hear her make puns, for it shows she is not standing on ceremony with her companions for the time being. And really I cannot understand the fuss people make in pretending to be shocked by any little joke of that kind. I call it simply a very bad form of affectation. Why, what takes them to a burlesque?—yet you'll hear a whole audience cry, 'Oh! oh!'—and they are delighted and laughing all the same, especially if the pun is an atrocious one. I am very glad to find Miss Rosslyn so frank."

"Well, that settles it. I won't remonstrate with her any more."

"I like to hear you talk like that!" he has the insolence to say. "You know quite well that when she does or says anything outrageous it is done simply to please you. She looks to you for approval every time; I have seen her again and again; she is always watching you at dinner, if she has anything malicious to say. Your wife declares that if you did not encourage her in mischief she

would be as well-behaved a girl as any in the country. Not that I have ever seen anything really to object to; of course not; I like fun as well as anybody; and I certainly like to find a girl like that enjoying plenty of freedom. She has an abundance of high spirits, hasn't she? Oh, but I say," this young man continues, suddenly changing his tone, "didn't she make an awful fool of that prig, A'Becket? Did you ever see anything like it? Wasn't it delightful? Why, she made him believe he was the cleverest fellow she had ever beheld. She flattered him just off his head. And it was done so nicely and neatly—and so seriously: of course he didn't suspect a little bit. Anyone else, though, could see what was going on. Oh, I assure you it was beautiful to look at!"

"Then you consider Miss Peggy an arrant hypocrite?—is that your conclusion?"

"A hypocrite?—certainly not. It was merely her kindness. If a man is such an ass as to like being flattered—well, he gets what he wants. Don't you think he was pleased? He grinned with his long front teeth until I thought he was going to tumble into his own mouth. I consider it was the height of good-nature for Miss Rosslyn to take so much

trouble in making herself agreeable to a fellow like that."

"But she did take the trouble!"

"Oh, yes," he admits, rather grudgingly. "She did. I suppose his airs and affectations amused her. And then, as I say, she is very good-natured; and he was your guest; of course she made herself agreeable to him—in an ordinary kind of way."

"And have you decided, then, on putting her into a book?"

He hesitates for a moment.

"No; I'm afraid she would puzzle me a little too much. But just fancy if I had a comedy, and she was to play the heroine. Why, her mere appearance on the stage would be half the battle; the first flash of her eyes, and the public would be in a pleasant and favourable mood. In private life, too," he continues, "I should say her face was a very efficient passport. She seems to find not much difficulty in making friends."

"But you haven't yet quite decided what is the particular fascination she exercises, have you?"

"I decide it?—not I! But what I am pretty sure of is this—that you wouldn't get at it by giving a catalogue of her features.

No ; it's some quality—perhaps some mental quality—perhaps some quality of disposition—that seems to make her attractive. She's very companionable, for one thing. She's not stiff. Her laugh is quite delightfully frank. There's no humbug about her. I should say that her mind was of a particularly healthy tone ; she seems to have the natural carelessness of a child—although your wife sometimes teases her by attributing all kinds of evil designs to her. Of course that's merely nonsense. You can see what excellent friends they are really. And she seems to be very affectionate—— ”

“ Who ? ”

“ Miss Rosslyn.”

“ Miss Rosslyn again ! My young friend, if you go on in this way, it isn't merely a description of Miss Rosslyn you'll have constructed, but a whole library of volumes about her. Suppose, for a couple of seconds, we talk about something else ! ”

“ Ah ! ” he says, “ it's all very well. You pretend not to be interested. You come and ask me what is the secret of her fascination—— ”

“ Did I really ? ”

“ At all events you affect an indifference

that you don't show when Miss Rosslyn and you are together," he says, with some touch of resentment. "One would almost think there was some secret understanding between you two—I mean that a third person hasn't a fair chance. I believe that she bamboozled that Oxford fellow simply and solely for your amusement."

"That is a very shocking thing to say of a young lady. However, as you have now got a perfectly clear conception of Miss Rosslyn's character, viewed from every possible standpoint, why shouldn't you put that into a book? It seems a pity that the result of so much study should be thrown away in idle talking."

"I'll wait," he answers, somewhat moodily—and who can tell what dark suspicions appear to have suddenly leapt into his head? "Since she made such a fool of that fellow A'Becket, perhaps she may be trying to make a fool of me; who knows?"

"And that is the end of all your praise of her!"

"Oh, no; I don't take back anything I have said," he answers, irresolutely. "But she is a clever-headed young woman; and—and she may be having her fun. That is only natural, at her age. Who could object?"

"I don't think you, at least, should object to the way in which she has treated you. Most young men would even be a little grateful."

"Oh, well," he says, with a careless air, "if it amuses her, of course I am very glad."

At this moment the two women-folk ahead paused for a few seconds, to allow us to overtake them; and as we drew near to them, and as our young Dramatist found that Miss Peggy's remarkably clear and expressive eyes were regarding him—and regarding him with a most amiable look—it is hardly to be wondered at that his face brightened up a little.

"Mr. Duncombe," she said (and you should have seen how instantly attentive he was, and respectful, and anxious to please), "Captain Columbus tells me we shall be at Banbury before long. That is some kind of a town, I suppose. And do you think it likely you could get me some blank music sheets?"

"Oh, yes, certainly!" was the immediate rejoinder.

"You know I am going to keep you to your promise of writing out for me 'The Green Bushes,'" said Miss Peggy, most pleasantly and cheerfully, "and I must do something

by way of exchange. You rather liked the 'Daisy' clog-dance—shall I note that down for you?"

"Will you?" he said, quickly.

"Oh, yes, or any of them you happen to like," she said, in the most good-natured way. "Several of them I picked up merely by hearing them—and I doubt whether you could get them in England. Now, if we have the blank music with us, I could jot down any of them for you, at any odd moment."

"Well, that is awfully kind of you!" said he, with the most submissive gratitude. "And—and let me see—what was the name of that very pretty one you played this morning?—"

This subject having been started, these two naturally walked on together. And where were all his wild suspicions now? Where was his "stand-off" attitude? Of course he was telling her how charmingly she played these tripping compositions; and of course she was saying how the song of the "Green Bushes" would remind her of this excursion when she was far away in America; and of course he was telling her that, when he was helping to plan out the expedition, he had no idea it would prove so enjoyable, though

everyone could see how much of that was owing to herself, and her happy fashion of making the best of everything. Poor wretch ! His suspicious mood was by far the safer for him ; but young people will go their own way.

And at length we came to a town ! It was the town of Banbury. We contemplated with a strange curiosity this mighty congeries of houses and buildings and roofs and chimneys ; and felt quite shy on encountering the gaze of the myriads of people who were hanging about the canal-basin. That was but a first and fleeting impression, however. When the horse had been led away to a stable, and when Murdoch had been entrusted with sundry commissions, we were free to explore this centre of civilization for ourselves ; and found it rather a featureless and empty little place, bearing a general kind of resemblance to Chipping Norton. Our own purchases did not extend beyond the blank sheets of music ; though we stared at the shop-windows with that aimless wish to buy something which generally gets into the head of boating-folk when they go ashore. No ; Banbury did not interest us much. But before we had got away from the place, we had formed the

conclusion that the familiar Oxfordshire rhyme—

Banbury Church

That hasn't got a steeple :

A very dirty town,

And a very proud people—

is grossly malicious, libellous, and untrue. So far from being proud, the people of Banbury simply overpowered us with their polite attentions. The fact was that we had here to face the two most wretchedly small and unmanageable bridges that we found on the whole of our route; and the population of Banbury, no doubt, ashamed of these obstructions, and sympathising with us in our anxious distress, were of one mind that we should not be stopped if their united exertions could assist us through. They got ropes and hauled. They got poles and pushed. They swarmed into the stern-sheets, in humility and kindness acting as additional ballast. They clustered on to the bow, to give us the benefit there also of their weight. Finally a lot of them got on the top, and lay on their backs, and shoved against the low arch with their feet. Amid all this wild struggling, a slight grating noise was heard; undoubtedly the boat was beginning to move; their efforts were redoubled; at

length we shot triumphantly through; and our multitude of friends could now go ashore again and regard with satisfaction the victory they had achieved. And yet they say that the inhabitants of Banbury are a proud people!

These obstructions had delayed us very considerably, however; and that evening we did not get much beyond Cropredy, the red brick houses and barns of which hamlet looked pleasantly warm in colour after the cold hues of green through which we had been sailing on this smurry afternoon. For the rain was on again.

"Really, I never saw anything like it!" Queen Tita said, impatiently. "I shouldn't wonder if Murdoch went back to the North and told his friends that he had been paying a visit to the lower regions. Do you know what they are called in Gaelic, Peggy?—*I-fruin*, the Island of Rain.* Poor Murdoch! Fancy what kind of a story he will have to tell about this country when he goes back to Tobermory."

"I like these wet afternoons very well,"

* She might have added that the Gaelic for smurry weather is *fluch*, which sounds ominously like the German *fluch*.

said Miss Peggy, with much content. "They are an excuse for lighting the candles so much the sooner."

"Oh, I think they are jolly!" young Shakespeare asserted, with superfluous energy of conviction. "They are so snug. You shut everything out. You are a little world all to yourselves. When you know that it is raining and miserable outside, it makes it just so much the pleasanter."

This was all very well for a couple of young people who could amuse themselves by playing Ferdinand and Miranda when they chose; but we had come to see what England was like in these out-of-the-way districts, and were less satisfied with being shut up in this pine-wood box. No doubt the little saloon looked comfortable enough when the lights were lit; and the velvet cushions and drawn red blinds were of a cheerful aspect; moreover, we had Miss Peggy, with her banjo, and her bright eyes, and her malice, and her mocking will-o'-the-wisp elusiveness of mood, and her sudden appeals for a frank "making-up" that you couldn't trust too far. Oh, yes, these were pleasant evenings; but they might have been in London. Of course, in London we should not have had the eerie feeling,

recurring from time to time, whatever kind of mischief or merriment was going on, that outside were still solitudes, and grey mists, and the solemn gathering down of a voiceless night. For no matter what village or hamlet might be within hail, we invariably chose a lonely, and, if possible, an inaccessible, spot for our moorings. On this particular evening, when Miss Peggy was proceeding to shut out the doleful landscape by drawing together the blinds, she suddenly paused. Then she silently beckoned us to look. Just outside, in the ghostly grey meadow, there was a solitary sheep that had come nibbling and nibbling its way down to the edge of the bank, and with such strict attention to business that it had not noticed this strange object in front of it. Moreover, the meadow was raised somewhat above the level of the water, so that the animal's head, bent to the ground, was precisely on a level with Miss Peggy's head, and only a foot or two off. Nearer and nearer it came.

"Tap on the window," we said to her, for we didn't want the poor creature to be frightened out of its wits.

But the same instant it had become aware that there was something in front of it; it

raised a pair of startled and wide-apart eyes only to find that a pair of human eyes were quite close to it, and gazing at it; and then, with a bound into the air—as if it had been shot—it sprang backwards.

“Really,” said Miss Peggy, as she drew the folds of the blind together, “I had no idea I looked so ferocious.”

Now, that evening was a memorable one, for it proved to have far-reaching consequences. During the day there had been a good deal of idle talking about literary projects, with even some vague suggestion that Miss Peggy might figure in a play or be described in a book; but after dinner on this evening, while as yet there was some wine on the table, and cigars were being produced, and while Miss Peggy’s white fingers just touched the strings of her banjo from time to time, with hardly an audible sound, our young Dramatist, secure of the sympathy of this small circle, and perhaps not unwilling to give himself some importance in the eyes of the two women-folk, unfolded to us the outlines of a far more ambitious undertaking.

“Well, you see, it is only the subject I have considered as yet,” said he—and Miss Peggy was so considerate as to stop her

tinkling, and listen with serious eyes; "but that seems to me to be striking enough. I don't even know whether it would be better treated in a play or in a book. Perhaps the story couldn't be fully told in a play—I'm afraid the 'unities' would have to suffer; but I will show you what the position is, and perhaps you will be able to help me with some hints. Wouldn't it be fine if I were to write a play, and Miss Rosslyn a novel, as an outcome of our meditations during this voyage? We should all have a hand in them—a kind of joint partnership——"

"Please, I want all my profits for myself," says Miss Peggy; "I have to buy innumerable things for my sister Emily before I go back home."

"But the story, Mr. Duncombe?" says Queen Tita, as Murdoch brings in the coffee.

"Well, look what a fine combination this is, whether for a story or a play," Shakespeare, junior, begins, with a certain air of complacency. "You have first a young Italian poet, of noble birth and large fortune, ardent, impetuous, and proud; of striking presence, too—tall and pale, with long, flowing red hair; a splendid horseman—indeed you can hardly tell whether he isn't

as proud of his horses as of his tragedies that have already given a new life to the dramatic literature of his country. A more striking figure you can hardly imagine; a man given over to all kinds of passionate impulses and enthusiasms; hurrying from one capital of Europe to another in feverish impatience, generally in a state of delirious joy or acutest anguish over some love-affair, and then seeking for distraction in violent fits of study. Very well; in the midst of this wild whirl of life, he is introduced, in Florence, to a young and beautiful Princess, of great accomplishments, fond of letters and the arts, and of the most amiable character. I'm afraid it wouldn't be easy to get a stage-heroine to look the part, for the peculiarity of her beauty is that she has singularly black eyes with a dazzlingly fair complexion and light hair. His own description of her is '*un dolce focoso negli occhi nerissimi accoppiatosi con candidissima pelle e biondi capelli.*' Now this is the situation—that this beautiful and amiable young Princess has been taken from a convent when she was nineteen years of age and married to a man she never saw before—a drunken, brutal old reprobate, who ill-treats her cruelly, and makes her life a constant misery to her; and this is

the condition of affairs when she meets this passionate and wayward being of a poet who, almost at first sight, conceives for her an exalted and ideal affection very different from his previous amours. They tell a story," continues our young playwright, satisfied to find the two women listening so attentively, "about that first meeting that perhaps might serve as an incident, when one came to arrange the materials. It was in a picture-gallery in Florence. The Princess happened to be looking at a portrait of Charles XII., and said that she greatly admired the costume. What must her new acquaintance do but go immediately and get for himself a precisely similar costume, in which he made his appearance in the streets of Florence, not heeding the sarcasm of his friends, though he seems to have been extremely sensitive to ridicule. That is a mere incident, by-the-way, of course. Well, on her side, the young Princess is at once interested in this vehement, tall, red-haired young Count—as she proved afterwards, she was much more than interested; but her husband is as jealous as he is brutal and ill-tempered, and the two friends only meet under the full observation of Florentine society. But, of course, the first thing that

presents itself to his mind is the necessity of freeing her from the cruel tyranny that is killing her existence; and here there comes on the scene an Irishman—a gay, adventurous Irishman, who has a nimble-witted wife; and soon they and the impetuous lover have a plot schemed out amongst them to spirit away the young Princess, and get her safely into a convent, so that she may appeal for protection to the Pope——”

“But, Mr. Duncombe,” Queen Tita says, with rather a puzzled look, “is this a real story you are telling us—or one you have invented?”

“Oh, it is a real story, so far as the facts go,” he answered. “Only I thought I wouldn’t mention names, so as to leave your minds free from any prejudice or prepossession.”

“If you did tell us the real names, shouldn’t we understand all the better?” she said.

“At least, the name of your hero—the tall, red-haired poet,” pleaded Miss Peggy.

“Why, Vittorio Alfieri!” he said, rather with an air of triumph.

“And the beautiful Princess?”

“The beautiful Princess—she was a bit of a poet, too, and an artist—many a portrait she painted of Alfieri—well, she was Louisa,

Princess of Stolberg, and Countess of Albany."

"The Countess of Albany?" Queen Tita repeated; and she looked at him still with that bewildered air. "The Countess of Albany? Then her husband—the man you described——"

"Yes," he said, with a careless laugh; "the besotted old drunkard who used to beat his wife was no other than your 'Bonnie Prince Charlie.'"

He knew not what he had done. In this trumpery search of his after materials for some trivial book or play, he had taken no thought that he might be outraging all kinds of personal sentiments and fondly-cherished associations. Of course, Queen Tita uttered no word. He might describe in what terms he pleased the last of the ill-fated Stuarts—the hapless wretch whom a hundred bitter disappointments dragged down to a miserable doom: she would make no protest. But one of us sitting there, and observing her proud silence, knew this right well—that if the young man who was so jauntily setting out on his play-writing career had succumbed in any way to the glamour of Miss Peggy's eyes, and to the provoking fascination of her wiles

and witchcraft—if he had been filling the future with plans and schemes far other than those pertaining to the stage—and if he had been counting on Queen Tita's intercession on his behalf, and perhaps even thinking that she would plead his cause for him, and befriend him, and help him to win that precious prize, then—through this unlucky disclosure of these literary designs of his—he had “wrought for” himself “an irredeemable woe.”

END OF VOL. I.

